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A NARRATIVE IN RELIEF The Historiography of English Modern Painting (1910-1915), from the 1910s to the 1950s

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A NARRATIVE IN RELIEF

The Historiography of English Modern Painting

(1910-1915), from the 1910s to the 1950s.

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the
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The Historiography of English Modern Painting

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Abstract

The groups of painters in England who experimented with new visual expressions of modernity between 1910 and 1915 are the subject of this historiographical research. More precisely, the accounts of Vorticism, Bloomsbury post-Impressionism and the modern art of painters associated with Sickert, (principally the Camden Town Group), have been critically examined over a forty year period in order to trace the narrative of their place in contemporary art criticism and their entry into histories of what soon became the recent past. This textually-based methodology has produced an insight into the forces acting upon the critical reception of a particular period subsequently seen by historians as a discrete phase in the evolution of British art. The readings of texts are organised chronologically so as to illustrate the

formation of a historical narrative and its variants, and to show how immediate responses and retrospective evaluations connect discursively.

The findings of the research have four aspects. Firstly, it has been fruitful to isolate the narrative of the years 1910-15 over forty years so as to test whether it is possible, using this longitudinal methodology, to comment productively on the integrity of this historical episode, and to establish how the narrative became a critical orthodoxy governed by a limited range of analytical perspectives. Secondly, estimations as to the quality of the art produced in these years developed a distinct, often negative, patterning in journalism and art historical writing and this is also traced in some detail over time. Dominant tropes in the critical language have been identified over this forty year period which became the default positions of historical analysis and which, I argue, impeded sophisticated or revisionist thinking. With a few notable exceptions, the analysis of early English modern art is poorly served by its commentators in this period and this weakened discursive health. Thirdly, this thesis also considers the nature and influence of, periodicals, newspapers, 'little magazines' and the genres of art-writing that were extant between 1910 and 1956 and relates this to the distinctions and similarities between art criticism and art history at this time. A fourth analytic strand concerns outside influences on the production of critical and historical texts. It explores the impact of promotional art writing, and exposes the professional pressures on, and rivalries between, writers and considers some of the wider political circumstances through which this particular debate on recent art was refracted.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Author's Declaration	vii
List of Illustrations	viii
Chapter One	1
Introduction to: Research Methodology, Parameters, Analytical Issues, Current Scholarship and Synoptic Critical Findings	
Chapter Two	44
Inception and Reception	
Chapter Three	92
Now Becomes Yesterday	
Chapter Four	145
Past Sense	
Chapter Five	222
Forty Years On	
Thesis Conclusion	274
Illustrations	283
Bibliography	295

Acknowledgements

This study was undertaken after reviewing the scholarship relating to twentieth-century English painting and concluding that a historiographical exercise would contribute to this body of knowledge.

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Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

This study was financed by the University of Plymouth and was not conducted in collaboration with any other body or institution.

Relevant seminars and conferences were regularly attended and archives were studied at appropriate institutions.

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SignedCarol Brand.....
Date15/2/11.....

Illustrations

1. Edgar Degas, *L'Absinthe*. 1876
2. Spencer Gore, *Rule Britannia*. 1910
3. Frederick Etchells, *The dead mole*. 1912
4. Roger Fry, *Angles sur l'Anglin*. 1912
5. Duncan Grant, *The Queen of Sheba*. 1912
6. Duncan Grant, *The Dancers*. 1910-11
7. Spencer Gore, *Letchworth Station*. 1912
8. Stanley Spencer, *John Donne arriving in Heaven*. 1911
9. Wyndham Lewis, *Kermesse*. 1912
10. David Bomberg, *Vision of Ezekiel*. 1912
11. David Bomberg, *In the Hold*. 1913-14
12. William Roberts, *The Resurrection*. 1912
13. Augustus John, *Woman Smiling*. 1908-9
14. Walter Sickert, *Ennui*. c.1915
15. Vanessa Bell, *Studland Beach*. c.1912
16. Harold Gilman, *Mrs. Mounter at the Breakfast Table*. exh. 1917
17. Wyndham Lewis, *Plan of War*. 1913-14
18. Charles Ginner, *The Great Loom*. unknown
19. Jacob Epstein, *The Rock Drill*. 1913-16
20. Mark Gertler, *Portrait of a Girl*. 1924
21. Wyndham Lewis, *Composition*. 1913
22. Duncan Grant, *In the Tub*. 1912

Chapter One

Introduction to: Research Methodology, Parameters, Analytical Issues, Current Scholarship, and Synoptic Critical Findings

The task of this research is to identify and expose a specific historical narrative and then to offer a commentary as to its development over forty years or so.

The validity of this exercise resides in the notoriety and persistence of this narrative within twentieth-century histories of modern art in England. That 1910-15 is regarded as the most intense and contained period when modernism emerged in England is historiographically secure, and this thesis builds its argument and evidence base from that consensus. What follows in subsequent chapters is an assessment of how this consensus, and its variants, which amounts to a collective historical narrative, was processed through the next decades until reaching an interim maturation in the early 1950s.

The methodology that guides this history of a history depends upon different levels of analysis. At an empirical level representative evidence within the vehicles of critical reception, such as books, essays, and journalism is brought together in chronological order to track the responses to the visual experimentation that flourished in the years just prior to the Great War. These primary sources are supplemented by reference to other aspects of critical reception such as exhibition catalogues, museum acquisition data and the activities of the art market. Corroboration of my analytical assertions will also arise from letters and diaries, both published and unpublished.

Further to this, and in parallel, a research perspective is developed which gives emphasis to how these estimations of the recent past evolved as historical records and what degree of success they offer as art writing, both for specialist

and lay readerships. This reflexivity necessitates a third layer of analytical awareness, namely recourse to theoretical thinking that illuminates the transpositions and adaptations inherent in the transfer from a lived reality into historical accounts. This also has to take account of the intermediate stage when current events are recorded, principally by journalism, a stage often described as the '*first draft of history*'¹.

This methodology is enriched by the ideas and insights of Hayden White, Michael Baxandall and Stephen Bann amongst others, whose ability to identify and fruitfully explore the mechanisms of history-making at a critical distance from primary sources has been drawn on in the case study proffered below. Theorists of literary genres have also, with a similar level of critical detachment, been of value as a way to develop a particular historiographical perspective in this research.

A central aim in this survey of the writing on English modernism is to be particularly mindful of and informed by Hayden White's theoretical amalgamation of the techniques of literary criticism and historiographical analysis, so as to develop a questioning attitude towards the vehicles of written critical reception thereby exposing the discursive forces at work within representative texts, a methodology that has an inherent impersonality.

It is relevant at the outset to be clear as to the parameters of this research; to say specifically what art is included in the detailed perusal of its critical reception over forty years. In scope is the painting produced and or exhibited in England between 1910 and 1915 that contemporary writers and later commentators recognised as radically expressive of modernity and which

¹ The quotation is usually attributed to Donald Graham of *The Washington Post* taken from a speech he made in 1963.

completely or partially rejected conventions of the past. Broadly this covers painting which introduced new visual techniques, and which privileged form and colour over mimetic representation. This is an inclusive approach but, importantly, is one circumscribed by the parameters in use at the time the art-writing was produced. Thus the key primary sources, spanning forty years, have been selected for their explicit designation of specific painters and painting as modern, or clearly adopted as such by the use of synonyms such as 'Post-Impressionist'. The survey is not exhaustive but aims to follow a historical narrative, thus it is a working principle that empirical evidence is no more than representative of the whole output of critics and historians.

The methodology has raised certain theoretical issues which I now introduce as background perspectives which go on to inform comment and analysis in the empirically-led sections of the thesis. This chapter continues by offering a summary of recent scholarship on English modernism to complement the emphasis on the first forty years of the history-writing of this research. Chapter one concludes by offering thematic reflections or analytical perspectives on what has been gleaned from, and gained by, this specific historiography.

Art Criticism and Art History

In a large portion of the empirical research described in subsequent chapters the analysis has to address two modes of writing; art criticism and art history. The proportions between these vary through the decades but nevertheless there is a constant articulation between them and this is further complicated by shades within each category. A crude working definition is that art criticism is normally denoted as reviews, journalism and essays written for lay and specialist readers contemporaneously with exhibitions or more retrospectively

and typically published in newspapers and magazines. In contrast art history, published with more formality, is by definition retrospective but exhibits the same range of understanding, scholarship and audiences. In this research it is necessary to consider both modes and also to be aware that there is an evolving diachronic interface between the two which, as lived events become recollections, and the judgements of time come into play allow the distinctions to become clearer. However this shift in the balance of art criticism to art history as time passes is an unstable progression as exhibitions which introduce new work alongside work from a previous period often revive the interest of art critics and cause them to comment on the past. There is also a notable body of essay material published throughout the period of this study which has clear art historical intentions and patterns of analysis. Where general points on the totality of critical output can be made, or the demarcation between art history and art criticism is unhelpful, the term 'art-writing' is deployed.

Stephen Bann qualifies any expectation of art historical maturity at this time, which strengthens the case for seeing art criticism and art history as fluid and evolving disciplines not given to established literary conventions or professional codes of quality. It will become clear as evidence is presented that not only are the mechanisms of critical reception often blurred and inadequate, it is the arguments put forward that are also lacking in finesse and originality. It can be provisionally asserted that were it not for the sporadic presence of scholarly essays in the specialist press the total output of art writing would be verging on the lamentable.

It is by no means an easy task to assess the development of art history in Britain in the twentieth century. This is for reasons that govern the history of the discipline as a whole, but are applicable in an especially acute form – so it may seem- within the British context. At the beginning of the century, art history as a form of academic enquiry had virtually no institutionalised existence in Britain although...the tradition of aesthetic criticism provided an alternative base for understanding and evaluating the arts.²

Bann also expands his observations to address the amalgam of art criticism and history within the essay-writing genre in specialist periodicals.

... it would be fair to say that many of the major contributions to art history by British authors continued to reflect, well into the twentieth century, the ambivalence inherent in the choice of an essayistic mode – implying a connection with art criticism – rather than a historicist mode, let alone a study based on philosophy and theory.³

At a very general level the specialised bibliography and journalism assembled for this research exhibits a diachronic pattern which guides the balance of evidence presented in each chapter that follows. Immediate reactions and responses to new art in the early years are largely captured within exhibition reviews and other brief journalistic pieces of writing. These were accompanied by the more measured essays in specialist periodicals, which were highly active in the period under review, but which did not often dwell on English modern art specifically but were important and complementary vehicles of theoretical analysis. These reviews and essays are characterised by their pre-occupation with continental exponents of modern art, especially the art that was produced in Paris and as a result, from a historiographical perspective, the overall evaluative debate is widely dispersed into a flux of ideas and opinion that needs to be taken note of in order to fully specify the emerging narrative.

² Bann, S. 'The History of Art History in Britain: A Critical Context for Recent Development and Debates', in Burke, P. (ed) *History and Historians in The Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 p 207

³ Bann, S. 2002 p210

In the early years there were also hastily published books that aimed to ride the wave of public interest. This, what might be called, concurrent reception activity can be seen, as the decades pass, to gradually dissolve into attempts to put historical accounts into print which, as will be demonstrated, were highly refracted by the contemporary circumstances of their own production, and also sporadically affected by later exhibitions, and the reviews of those exhibitions, particularly those exhibitions that had a retrospective element. Thus the overall evidence in the historiography addressed by this research is characterised by a shifting balance that was struck between immediate and quick-fire journalism, more generalised serious essays and accessible books for the non-specialist reader, and this was enriched by sporadic scholarly surveys and monographs. This multifarious and constantly renewed critical output diversifies into historical accounts, in various genres, that over time situate the early years within a lengthening narrative of some complexity. It is therefore inevitable that the emphasis on early journalistic reviews and essays gives way, as the research tracks the decades, to an assessment of art history books which incorporated the emergence of domestic modernism and which had the benefit of a longer time-span on which to base art historical judgements. Of course these transitions in art writing have universal, as well as specific characteristics relating to the arrival of new art in England. It is the aim of Chapter 4 in particular, *'Now Becomes Yesterday'* to expound on this point, testing David Carrier's assertion that *'Writing by critics is data for historians.'* His comment, although inspired by more recent writers, is located in a perceptive argument that can be borne in mind when primary material is under scrutiny. A longer quotation is helpful here to pinpoint this position more fully.

Writing by critics is data for historians, who are expected to summarise earlier commentary before presenting their own interpretations. For the historian, tradition cannot but have weight; even if earlier commentators be judged entirely wrong-headed, the need to present their claims gives the historian's argument a slower rhythm than the critic's analysis....For a critic it suffices to say, 'I like or dislike such-and-such', and to give reasons which, upon critical reflection, may seem highly subjective; the historian typically aspires to objectivity.⁴

Other theorists also make distinctions between art criticism and the writing of art history, the acceptance of which could inhibit this historiography that emphasises the interpenetration of the two activities. This is a synthesis that I would contend should legitimately be supported for its particular suitability to an examination of the interface between art journalism as it broadens into 'histories' of recent events. This is particularly evident in the work of prominent reviewers and journalists who also published extended and elaborated appraisals in book form, such as Frank Rutter, Charles Marriott and Roger Fry. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell refer to Stephen Bann as their source for taking the more delineated line quoting the distinction he made in, *'The True Vine: Visual Representation and the Western Tradition'*⁵, but following the citation of this orthodoxy they add a further insight themselves as to the pressures on historians to marginalise or subsume art criticism that the historiographical material of this survey needs to address.

Stephen Bann distinguishes between the two activities: art history 'follow(s) the fortunes of an object in time' whereas art criticism 'provides an extratemporal evaluation of that object'...

Some academic art historians may prefer to play down the fact of this interrelation, for art history's concern with historical retrieval – not with criticism- primarily sanctions it as an academic activity.⁶

⁴ Carrier, D. 'Artcriticism-writing, Arthistory-writing, and Artwriting' in *The Art Bulletin* v.78 Summer 1996, p403

⁵ Bann, S. *The True Vine, Visual Representation and the Western Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 p112

⁶ Kemal and Gaskell, (eds) *The Language of Art History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 p1

This observation which refers to the legitimating skill of archival expertise and a belief that history can be neutrally processed and offered up to the reader with scientifically oriented precision speaks of a philosophical stance that has an important, but limited, application to this enquiry. Bann's view, derived from a wide grasp of mainstream traditions of historical writing, helpfully prompts the qualification that it is apparent from the historiographical material examined in *this* narrower research that the discursive and conceptual formations of history-writing that writers concerned with modern art demonstrated were often immature, weakly differentiated and idiosyncratic. This is perhaps to be expected in an environment where writers on art typically had feet in many camps; often simultaneously balancing careers as critics, populist art history writers, exhibition impresarios, curators, magazine editors and so on. The calm intellectual seclusion of academe was not available to them and this is reflected in the *ad hoc* way in which subjective commentary and anecdotal techniques of information retrieval are handled, whether this is to be found in art criticism or art history.

Narrative

The concept of historical narrative is central to this research and is the basis of the evidence selected in chapters 2-5. More specifically, this research seeks to identify and trace the *dominant* historical narrative as it is the idea which precipitated this particular case study. There is a strong reiterative quality in the literature which has become tantamount to a highly mythologized phase in English art history and one that reached an identifiable culmination in the early 1950s. It is on this foundation that the idea of '*A Narrative in Relief*' is used to define and shape the research, in that I argue that it is possible to trace with

validity, in a largely discrete manner, the accounts of the pre-War years of experimentation in and through the much wider body of historical material that addresses English art history of the first half of the twentieth century.

As stated it is proposed that a *dominant* narrative comprises reiterated and repeated assessments that recur over time and which were rehearsed in the majority of art historical publications that addressed English modernism. This narrative is capable of encompassing variations and contrasts although these often have a repetitive pattern too, thus operating as sub-narratives within the overall formation. Story-like parables of causes and effects become evident as a narrative is shaped and distilled and these are revealed particularly acutely in general surveys of modernism where only a few paragraphs or pages are allotted to these five years. Critical tropes are the chief vehicles of analytical repetitions and these form building blocks within the narrative structure of individual pieces of writing but importantly these also combine across textual boundaries to build the collective narrative. These tropes show they are capable of being carried forward inexorably as the narrative gathers momentum and are supplemented by other figurative clichés which emerge in response to contemporary events.

Hayden White has theorised how historical narratives are conceived and constructed and his proposition that factually driven narrative resembles the structures of fictional writing is used to illuminate aspects of the historiography presented below. Crucially White maintains that narratives are not neutral vehicles for history.

Many modern historians hold that narrative discourse, far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes, is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality, a conceptual or pseudo-conceptual 'content' which, when used to represent real events, endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought.⁷

White draws attention to the artistry of historians claiming their efforts rely upon fictive techniques.

...historians invented nothing but historical flourishes or poetic effects to the end of engaging their readers' attention and sustaining their interest in the true story they had to tell.⁸

White however does make an important distinction between historians who narrate their accounts, and those who narrativise; the former school of historians, (White cites Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Huizinga and Braudel) do not endow their work with story-telling infrastructures, whereas the latter rely on well-signalled beginnings, middles and ends to their accounts. White puts this simply;

... their example permits us to distinguish between a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativises, between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story.⁹

The art history and criticism, drawn from the first half of the twentieth century, that is highlighted in this thesis has been selected for its representativeness and wide dissemination. It can be provisionally asserted that the quality it most clearly reveals is an intrinsic and tenacious narrativisation, consciously or unconsciously applied in order to both maintain reader interest and to genuinely conceive of the recent past as a well-shaped story-like episode. It may also be

⁷ White, H. *The Content of The Form*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987 p.ix

⁸ *ibid.* p.x

⁹ *ibid.* p.2

possible to assert with some guarded provisionality that where a *dominant* narrative is to be found, a narrativising process is likely to be hard at work.

White offers further indirect encouragement to the idea that the research being presented in this thesis is an apt candidate for applying his insights.

Historiography is an especially good ground on which to consider the nature of narration and narrativity because it is here that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual.¹⁰

Also White's careful attention to distinguishing annals, chronicles and narrative modes of history-writing can be used to underpin analysis when the 'histories' of English modernism are under scrutiny .

*While annals represent historical reality as if real events did not display the form of a story, the chronicler represents it as if real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories. And the official wisdom has it that however objective a historian might be in his reporting of events, however judicious he has been in his dating of *res gestae*, his account retains something less than a proper history if he has failed to give to reality the form of a story.¹¹*

White develops his argument further in a line of reasoning which alerts the analyst of any specific historiography because he warns of an inherent historical compromise that goes beyond more obvious, but sometimes important, accusations of teleological drift in any given account.

Common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that makes up its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events all along. What I am trying to establish is the nature of this immanence in any account of real events, events that are offered as the proper content of historical discourse. These events are not real because they occurred but because, first, they were remembered, and second, they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence. In order however, for an account of them to be considered a historical account, it is not enough that they be recorded in

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.4

¹¹ *ibid.* P.5

*the order of their original occurrence. It is the fact that they can be recorded otherwise, in an order of narrative, that makes them, at one and the same time, questionable as to their authenticity and susceptible to being considered as tokens of reality.*¹²

My purpose in using White to inform this research, and specifically the above acknowledgement of his perceptions of history- writing, is to increase the sensitivity to authorial choices and motivations, whether they are self-conscious or not. The hegemony of certain key writers central to this historiographical exercise - Fry, Bell, Read, Rutter, Rothenstein and so on - is difficult to contest, and White is valuable in this regard too when he reminds that,

*To conceive of narrative discourse in this way permits us to account for its universality as a cultural fact and for the interest that dominant social groups have not only in controlling what will pass for the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation but also in assuring the belief that social reality itself can be both lived and realistically comprehended as a story.*¹³

It is White's belief in the power and presence of themes, or tropes which carry the force of narrative content, that has also shaped the analysis of texts as this research has been undertaken. 'Trope' is now a widely used concept in art history and its meaning has loosened accordingly. White is partly responsible for the move from the purely philosophical definition,¹⁴ which denotes figurative and metaphorical language, towards a usage that denotes styles of discourse endemic in literary writing, and as such can be more flexibly applied to the dominant and default positions in any given period of time, which can readily be discerned in historical accounts.¹⁵ White also asserts that historical writing can be judged and determined by its use of tropically-framed language. It is also the case that 'trope' has loosened even further as a term in recent years and now is

¹² Ibid. p.20

¹³ Ibid. p.x

¹⁴ The term originates in the Greek 'tropos' meaning a 'change' or 'turn' and can thus be used to convey a transfer from literal to metaphorical language

¹⁵ See White, H. *Metahistory, The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973. p46

frequently operates as an approximate synonym for 'idea' or 'concept'. The research presented below broadly adopts the term 'trope' as a widely used critical theme that amounts to a metaphorical substructure in the art criticism and art history under scrutiny.

It is also recognised that other meta-historical thinking has a bearing on the analytical perspective this thesis adopts. Specifically I argue that a central paradigm, and some of its related variants, strongly emerged in the formulation of histories of early English modernism. By this I mean that the critical tropes become gathered into a prevailing idea that governed much of the writing. The theory of paradigm formation found clearest expression in the case Thomas Kuhn makes for amassed and collective beliefs and assumptions in the sciences, but is also related to Foucault's idea of the *episteme*, that has a wider application to discourse more generally.¹⁶

Modernism and Modernity

It is also central to this historiography that the maturity, or otherwise of art writers' professional expertise is assessed more generally and to relate this to an understanding of the new analytical and theoretical challenges that modernism itself presented. The trajectory of art critical language therefore will be seen to have a bearing on the ideas that are expressed to both specialist and lay audiences. It will also be noted how this discursive capability relates to the relatively late development of art history in Britain as an academic discipline.

Acknowledgement of this accentuates the importance that needs to be attached

¹⁶ See Kuhn, T. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions – second edition enlarged*; Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970; originally published 1962. and Foucault, M. *The Order of Things – An Archaeology of The Human Sciences*; New York: Vintage Books 1973; originally published 1970

to the complex art milieu, principally in London, of artists, critics, impresarios and gallery curators and the manner in which they operated and interacted to create and promote domestic cultural capital and canonical foundations. The importance of this critical environment is accentuated by the relatively small number of critics and art historians during these decades who engaged in any serious review of domestic modernists. This small number was also prone to re-publish or re-work accounts with little major new thinking to add to their original critical standpoints; Rutter, Marriott and Wilenski being notable examples.

The critical challenges posed to art writers in their efforts to say what constituted modernism and its history cannot be over emphasised and needs to be acknowledged at this introductory stage. James Elkins in *'Master Narratives and Their Discontents'* is at once both reassuring and alerting as to the complexities facing scholarship which has modernism as its defining parameter which also offers a way to become alert to the particular dilemmas facing writers at the beginning of the 20th century. He says,

...it is relevant to remark that the variety of ways scholars have construed the history and characteristics of modernism is measurably different from the way other periods in art history, say Baroque or Byzantine, have been understood.¹⁷

Elkins goes on to lay out five ways in which he believes the origins of modernism have been configured that range from the broadest view that modernism began in the Renaissance up to the way Greenberg's critical dominance propelled American Abstract Expressionism into a defining hegemony. Elkins fourth model that *'Modernism begins with Cézanne or Picasso'* is no more than an approximate fit to the narrative to be identified in the tradition of accounting for English modernism in the first half of the twentieth

¹⁷ Elkins, J. *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*, New York and London: Routledge, 2005 p. 37

century, in that although Cézanne is frequently cited Picasso's impact is rarely brought to bear. There is evidence however, that in the forty year period under scrutiny, and when English expressions of modernism are the central subject-matter, that referring back to precedents before Cézanne does indeed enter the discourse, especially when national heroes such as Turner and Constable are held up to offer evidence of excellence and influence; sometimes to shore up national artistic competence and also occasionally to be suggested as antecedents of later developments, including modernism, both in England and in Europe more widely.

It is Elkins' third possible start-point, the '*generation of Manet and Baudelaire*' that in practice problematises the many citations of Cézanne as the founder of modernism. The First post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, assembled and carefully called '*Manet and the Post-Impressionists*' by Roger Fry, testifies to an active need at this time to discern explanations and lineage, and one which clearly hedges his position on Cézanne and suggests that the roots of the new tendency are older. This contrasts with the huge acclamation of artistic innovation that both Fry and Bell gave to Cézanne over many years effectively eclipsing other contending artists, although this is always in a personal discursive tension with Fry's awareness of a longer tradition, stretching back long before Manet and Cézanne, a position that other art writers also echoed from time to time.

Aside from the challenge to situate modernism historically it is also to Roger Fry that any historiographical examination of this period immediately looks for indications of the emerging language that would help to differentiate the body of art that challenged the past. In his

introduction to the essay 'Cézanne'¹⁸ by Maurice Denis, even though concerned with French art, Fry's text reveals an important definitional cusp that initially described developments as 'modern', but, as becomes clear this is no more than a neutral synonym for 'new'.

*Anyone who has the opportunity of observing modern French art cannot fail to be struck by the new tendencies in the last few years. A new ambition, a new conception of the purpose and methods of painting, are generally emerging; a new hope too, and a new courage to attempt in painting that direct expression of imagined states of consciousness which has for so long been relegated to music and poetry. This new conception of art, in which the decorative elements predominate at the expense of the representative, is not the outcome of any conscious archaistic endeavour, such as made, and perhaps inevitably marred, our own pre-Raphaelite movement.*¹⁹

In this passage that boldly announces radical change it is clear that the word 'modern' to Fry at this stage in 1909 means little more than 'recent', and it is instead the heavy and repeated reliance on 'new' which conveys his point and fuels the rhetoric of his introductory remarks on Cézanne. Thus this prominent passage, in one of the major art periodicals of this time, speaks of a moment when the descriptor 'modern', importantly in its lower case format, could be deployed quite casually. Fry's strong emphasis on 'new', with 'modern' as a weak supporting idea, substantiates not only a terminological licence operating at this time but also reminds of Stephen Bann's warning that modernism is a, *'retrospective construction.'*²⁰

This is *not* to say of course that 'modern', and its derivatives, were not liberally called on to capture either the contemporary scene, or to reflect on the past, but it *is* to say that its semantic loading was variable and

¹⁸ Fry, R. Introductory Note to Denis, M. 'Cézanne', *Burlington Magazine*, October 1909.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.207

²⁰ Bann, S. *Ways Round Modernism*, London: Routledge, 2007.p.32

inconsistent. However, the expression 'modern art' did begin to acquire a presence in the literature and this quickly-coined category, especially in titles of books, belies a seething mass of boundary and definitional variations, to the point where each writer felt at liberty to include or exclude artists at will under this heading. The inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the term as applied to English artists in particular was notably blurred as writers clearly annexed the collocation with little commentary. This noticeable faith in the usefulness of 'modern art' as a flexible label can also be seen as an expedient solution to addressing and embracing a wide continuum of artistic practice as new visual ideas were developed haltingly in England. There were also many artists, such as Duncan Grant, whose work did not develop in a linear pattern. Thus the phrase 'modern art' became a very accommodating term that hardened slowly and patchily. It is therefore to be expected that as a product of this fluidity in the nomenclature a theoretical discourse as to its essence would also be hampered. In its place a tradition quickly established itself of books and serious articles that blithely corralled artists by their affiliations and exhibiting groupings and tended to analyse their work intrinsically with little appetite for finding and defending underpinning concepts that would unite their efforts in a grand theory of what constituted the modern. Therefore it was to be expected that in this unregulated critical environment 'modern' 'modernism' and 'modern art' functioned largely as denominations of artistic practice subject to little rigour or scrutiny. However, as has been proposed, a loose ring-fence that enclosed those artists who experimented with new forms, new

colour, and new subject-matter becomes the working hypothecation for this research.

At the next level of nomenclature the designation of 'Post-Impressionism' served to create a slightly more robust critical currency as writers looked for, and found, English exponents of French artistic impulses and also new native idioms. This term was of course famously coined for the first Grafton Galleries exhibition in 1910-11, mounted by Roger Fry, and it served to create a useful receptacle for new domestic art that prioritised colour and form. It was also used liberally, and sometimes inconsistently, to contrast with the Cubist, Vorticist and Futurist strands of modern art as they arrived from abroad or were developed indigenously - with great self-definition in the case of Vorticism. However, as the following chapters illustrate there is little evidence that terminology was ever anything but fluid and highly nuanced by individual writers. It becomes starkly apparent that familiar chapter headings such as 'English Post-Impressionism' have only limited commonality in terms of the artists discussed.

The comments above argue for an awareness of an endemic fluidity of language to both describe painting and to delineate strands of change and development. Such an observation can also be extended to the notion that this discursive melting-pot had an adverse effect on the likelihood of a robust theoretical debate on modern art itself emerging.

What also needs to be addressed is the more fundamental evidence in this historiography of the manner in which writers tried to explain *why* modern art looked the way it did, and what drove the artists to break with

convention and with what effect. This raises the issue of modern art's relationship to modernity and the awareness, or even articulation amongst writers of its power to cause and inspire modern art.

In general, it has to be noted that discourse concerning the causes and broad influences on modern art articulated in journalism and historical accounts during the first half of the twentieth century is muted.

Understandings of broad cultural, political and societal shifts bear very little on the contextual material offered by writers to explain the new. The emphasis is almost wholly on establishing a convincing and hermetic argument on how recent art owes allegiances, (or not) to art that preceded it. In other words the lineage of art itself, whether highlighting rejection or homage, is offered as a sufficient explanation of modern painting. However, one of the earliest attempts to construct a new commentary on the new art was hastily published by Frank Rutter in 1910. '*Revolution in Art*', -a brief treatise of 56 pages which bravely attempts in its first section called, '*For people who know nothing whatsoever of the art of painting*', to open up a wider train of thought. Commenting on the causes of the '*revolution*' he says,

Indirectly it may be not altogether unconnected with the present unrest in politics and economics; directly it has no concern with civic or national disturbances. ²¹

This however is a faint glimmer amongst a huge volume of analysis offered by critics whose concern was to situate modern art without ostensibly straying from the most proximate cultural environment and chronology, which also served as a demonstration of their scholarship

²¹ Rutter, F. *Revolution in Art, An Introduction to the study of Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and other Modern Painters*, London: Virtue and Co. 1910. p.1

and connoisseurship – essential legitimization if their ideas about new art were to be taken seriously. Their potential as social historians of art barely surfaced, other than through oblique references to the most momentous contemporary events.

The most important exceptions to this inward-looking critical mode is the reception afforded to art that was seen as anticipating and expressing the agonies and realities of the First World War, (see chapters 2 and 3)

Another exception relates to the impact and influence of photography and later cinema, which are, and were, of course part of the world of artistic visual experiences, although much broader culturally. These new and straightforward hallmarks of modernity certainly become part of the narrative and were invoked to explain modern art, but are rarely considered within a wider conceptual understanding of modernity. It is left to much later commentators, outside the remit of this research, to draw together the deep-seated inter-connectivity inherent in the accelerated experiences of modernisation that the Industrial Revolution had afforded and which much later became a cornerstone of situating modern art historically.

Thus it is possible to argue that when immersed in the archive of critical reception and early histories of the emergence of modern art it becomes clear that the ubiquitous presence of modernity, affecting every aspect of life, is not confronted with any extended conceptual analysis *per se*.

However, it becomes significantly implied when retrospective analytical tools are administered which are then able to reveal a discourse imbued

both with enthusiasm for modernity and also widespread regret as to its excesses and bewildering pace.

A further observation on the way in which this historiographical exercise unfolds is to be aware that despite the pervasive presence of modernity the minimal extent to which literary modernism influenced mainstream art writing is noticeable. By and large art writers and exhibition reviewers adhered to solidly-crafted formulaic accounts. The ground-breaking manner in which Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf and T.S.Eliot established internationally recognised modernist forms and the journals which circulated experimental poetry and fiction all appeared to have had little impact on the literary style and structure of writing about art in the major periodicals and newspapers which remained confined within the traditional narrative unities. At the margins, in some of the pre-War 'little magazines' that incorporated articles on art and also in manifesto writing emanating from art groupings and movements there were some significant efforts to join with the literary modernists in their endeavour to fracture literary conventions; none more so than the two editions of *Blast* published by the Vorticist movement in 1914 and 1915.

Lisa Tickner however, makes a cogent case for being alert to other ways in which the experience of modernity imbues the language in England used to describe and assign meaning and value to art in the early twentieth century. Her analysis on this matter offers a checklist of modernity's preoccupations against which to test any given writer's conceptual armature.

Running through the critical discussion of art and through art-world polemics, are easily discernible currents of ideas emanating from Social Darwinism, from scientific discoveries and technological developments, as well as from reactions against the perceived dominance of rationalist, empiricist and secular thought in various forms of transcendentalism²².

A strong instance of Tickner's assertion emerges in some of the elitist commentary on the public's reaction to the 1914 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, (see next chapter) and much later in the enthusiasm some writers demonstrated for the advances in psychology and brain science as they sought to critique Vorticism using new insights, (addressed more fully in chapter four).

Publication Patterns

There are significant patterns that are discernable when this 'narrative in relief' is viewed overall purely in terms of its bibliography. Of particular importance is to note the proportions within the whole body of the art writing that was produced over this fifty year period. Whatever measures are used to assess this output it is emphatically evident that writing about *modern* art was a very minor fraction, and further, that writing about *English* modern art was a strikingly small proportion of *that* output.

However, when looking at the relatively small bibliography relevant to this research there are some general features that can be identified so as to offer at this point some broad observations that can later be used more precisely to reveal its adequacy –or lack of.

There is a strand in the bibliography of writers who themselves tracked modern art and wrote up-dated accounts every few years, such as R.H.

²² Tickner, L. *Modern Life and Modern Subjects – British Art in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000,p211

Wilenski. Frank Rutter follows this pattern too and he also demonstrates, even in the titles of his major publications, both the trajectory of thought and the variety of genres that informed the discourse.²³

Another feature is the way many writers ranged across the whole of art history. This strengthened their authority on modern art but was, it should be assumed, probably chiefly driven by their enthusiasms, expertise and career objectives; Roger Fry being a notable example. Other writers come from an intellectual polymath tradition, particularly those whose cultural competences originated in the study of English literature and who diversified with great effect; Herbert Read and Geoffrey Grigson being examples. Also, as has been remarked on above, those who wrote from their expertise as gallery directors and curators were very prevalent as their powerbase, in practice, filled a space that would later be occupied by academic writers based in universities. Mary Chamot and John Rothenstein are prominent examples of this museum-based art history-writing.

In the realm of day-to-day art journalism there was a great diversity of specialist and non-specialist writers, some of whom also published books. As will be further described below there is also, a significant element within this body of writers, of artists, who were them-selves part of the Pre-WW1 experimentation, and who took up this form of employment as an adjunct to their main activities. It is argued elsewhere

²³ These three successive examples from Rutter's bibliography illustrate the point.
Rutter, F. *Revolution in Art, and Introduction to the study of Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and other modern painters*. London: Art News Press, 1910
Rutter, F. *Evolution in Modern Art, a study in Modern Painting 1870-1925*, London: Harrap, 1926.
Rutter, F. *Since I was Twenty-five*, London: Constable, 1927

that these interventions are highly relevant to the overall discourse. Their articles were typically very idiosyncratic, (Wyndham Lewis and Walter Sickert especially) and thereby they infused the debates with a remarkable and erratic panache. More measured journalism and article-writing also came from a younger generation of artists such as Paul Nash whose commentaries, often obliquely, contributed to the narrative that this survey pursues.

The corpus of art historical material published as books over a forty year period can also be analysed in terms of the illustrations that are included to strengthen the narrative. It is clear that further research to compile a quantitative survey and map of this could be undertaken in order to assess the range of artists and the extent to which illustrations and photographs harmonise with the text and influence canon formation. However, this textually-oriented research has noted in passing differing approaches to this staple of art historical literature; many books have no illustrations at all²⁴ and others, dating from a similar time, demonstrate that strenuous efforts by the authors and publishers to assemble a rich collection²⁵ have clearly been made. Not surprisingly the publications by the Tate gallery's curators Mary Chamot and John Rothenstein, considered in chapters 4 and 5, are fully illustrated and their selections reach far beyond the institution for which they worked.

²⁴ For example see, Rutter, F., *Some Contemporary Artists*, London: Leonard Parsons, 1922.

²⁵ For example see Marriott, C. *Modern Movements in Painting*, London: Chapman and Hall 1920 has 88 reproductions, several in full colour.

Current Scholarship

I now acknowledge some of the newer histories of English modernism that have appeared in the last thirty years or so which have posited fresh ways to consider English modernism. This scholarship has questioned and problematised many of the older art historical tropes that this thesis seeks to examine in some detail. My remit to exhumate the first forty years of reception history as a discrete narrative can, I hope, be a complement to the revisionary scholarship referred to below. Importantly, this scholarship has also enriched the analytical perspectives that have underpinned the methodology and priorities of this research exercise.

When Charles Harrison prefaced the first edition of his seminal account in 1981 he famously disclaimed any notion that he was over-turning '*the traditional closures on art-historical writing*'²⁶, remarking pointedly however that there was indeed a need for new thinking. What follows is an attempt to select from the critical output since then a small number of publications which have had a particular bearing on the way in which this historiography, although being confined to 1910-1956, can be more adequately and sensitively identified. However, what can also be noted is that it is principally in the most scholarly and specialised of contexts that new ideas have been tested and substantiated. Popular histories of English art still largely depend upon the older narrative.

Just prior to Harrison's ambivalent sense of ambition announced in '*English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*', in 1978 Dennis Farr's *English Art 1870-1940* was published as Volume X1 in *The Oxford History of English Art*, (published 1984

²⁶ Harrison, C. *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981.p.7

in paperback)²⁷. Dennis Farr's credentials and scholarship within the Tate Gallery since 1954 lent this work authority and due respect and the text today is still able to convey a carefully wrought, insightful account. However, it does mark a point in time before the preoccupation to probe the semantic possibilities of 'modernism' and so this does not form the basis of his judgements, nor does it take the more acerbic tone Harrison took three years later. This latter quality, a commitment to an overt sharp opinion, may in part be absent in Farr's account due to the constraints inherent in contributing to an eleven volume landmark series of Art History. Of particular interest to this research is Farr's decision to group, '*Bloomsbury, Camden Town, and Vorticism*' in one chapter as it speaks of a taxonomy that has a currency from fore-running art history and criticism, and which therefore strengthens the parameters of this research.

Dennis Farr, in his preface, admits to the fact that this volume had been in preparation for fifteen years prior to 1978 and so its long gestation can be seen as the product of more than a decade's effort to formulate an up-dated stance towards English art over the nominated seventy years. His methodology is to situate the art and artists of the 1910-15 period firmly within the established structures of production and reception in his attention to the art schools, the leading teachers, the exhibition groupings and the exhibition impresarios and wide references to outside influences from other disciplines and other countries results in an empirical richness that builds authority and gravitas. However, the judgements that Farr arrives at, that are made possible by this background information and the detailed analyses of many paintings, are often closely reminiscent of earlier publications, (as the body of this thesis will explore), that deployed a lesser scholarship. There are however new insights, although

²⁷ Farr, D. *English Art 1870-1940*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. 1978.

muted, which are to be discerned on careful reading and they demonstrate the stirrings of a discursive revisionism that would gather momentum. Farr concurs with the standard argument that English art before the Great War was hampered by, '*besetting provincialism*'²⁸, but, in contrast, his nuanced account of Wyndham Lewis' relationship to Futurism and Cubism has a questioning sophistication that opens up the possibility of an England-specific version of modernism that would not automatically have to be regarded as qualitatively inferior. He also challenges Lewis' own views of early Vorticist work; clearly showing that by 1978 Lewis' accounts of his own work were sufficiently historically distant so as to be open to challenge.

The English variant of Cubism seems to have been based on an imperfect understanding of the Franco-Spanish prototype for which Lewis must bear some responsibility. He attacked the Cubists, as we have seen, for their imagined preference for presenting a single instance of time, whereas the French Cubist apologists were agreed that Cubism aimed at creating 'a moment of stasis into which is poured a series of unknown moments, from past, present, and future.' (quoted from Wagner op cit see footnote p.215) Artistic competence apart, it is notable that such Cubist-inspired paintings as survive of Lewis, Bomberg, and Wadsworth, for example, all show a greater concern for surface pattern, which the dynamic conflict of abstract lines and curves in a shallow space, rather than with presenting a multiplicity of facets of recognisable figures and objects, the three-dimensional solidity of which was always implicit.²⁹

In terms of the closest fit to the period of art production under review in this thesis, '*Modern Art in Britain 1910-1914*', by Anna Gruetzner Robins is pertinent. Robins chiefly looks critically at a series of exhibitions held in Britain during these years. The publication accompanied a major exhibition mounted by the Barbican Art Gallery in 1997 and its parameters testify to a central premise that governs both her book and also this research. This premise is succinctly put by John Hoole, curator of the Barbican Art Gallery in the Foreword.

²⁸ ibid. p.200

²⁹ ibid. p.215.

*Dr. Robins' thesis is that the selection of these exhibitions established the canons of modern art as we know them today.*³⁰

The exhibitions critically exhumed by Robins also include those which featured work by The Italian Futurists (Sackville Gallery March 1912), and French Modernists at both the Grafton Galleries Post-Impressionist exhibitions (1910-11 and 1912). Robins' account of the chief pre-War exhibitions provides a strong reminder that these events were major engines of canon formation and narrative contour particularly at this germinatory time, and that analysis of the critical reception of the English modernists needs to acknowledge the reception of painting from the continent that was exhibited contemporaneously in Britain. What also matters in terms of the way Robins develops her arguments is the objective way in which she is able to see that the histories of the English modernists of this period have been, in her view, hampered by being analysed too much in isolation from continental connections and that this has resulted in, or been caused by too much emphasis on '*the social formations within British modernism*'³¹. This is a perceptive remark that remains true and can be said to detract from the health of the historiography as a whole. Robins even suggests,

*The petty quarrels of these British modernists have determined the tenor of much of the subsequent scholarship*³²

This is a comment which has the hallmark of an emerging objectivity in more recent scholarship and is thereby able to highlight an aspect of critical weakness in the older art historical literature. Robins, rightly relying on her detailed evidence base and her knowledge of the critical literature, wishes to

³⁰ Gruetzner Robins, A. *Modern Art in Britain 1910-1914*, London: Merrell Holberton in Association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1997, p.4

³¹ Ibid. p. 152

³² Ibid. p. 152

encourage study of the '*shared links*'³³ of the modernists rather than a narrative of factional and splintered groups of artists.

1997 was also the year in which David Peters Corbett published '*The Modernity of English Art*'. The book has a strong central message that says it '*reconceptualises the history of English painting from 1914 to the end of the 1920's.*'³⁴ This is a bold announcement of a shift in thinking that Peters Corbett has developed and worked on co-operatively with other scholars; perhaps reaching full maturity as a critical position in '*The World in Paint – Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848-1914*'³⁵ The key breakthrough in the earlier publication rests on an England-specific way to problematise modernism itself. This has influenced the decision to give due weight to this and other terminological assumptions that infuse and shape the critical record, and to put a heavy reliance on being analytically aware of other conceptual armatures. It is this research of Peters Corbett that has enabled some of the entrenched historical positions to become more visible as he prises them from their habitual theoretical context.

Put briefly, Peters Corbett offers the reader in 1997 a way to move on from Charles Harrison's self-declared refusal in 1981 to engage in major revisionism. As this research demonstrates below, the first forty years of historiography are amply supplied with a duality in the discourse that contrasts indigenous artistic tendencies, often unfavourably, with pioneering modernism – usually sparked by foreign influence. Peters Corbett, in his introduction, avows to '*eschew this*

³³ *ibid* p.158

³⁴ Peters Corbett, D. *The Modernity of English Art 194-1930*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997, Back Cover Note.

³⁵ Peters Corbett, D. *The World in Paint, Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848-1914*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004.

*comparative focus in favour of a cultural history*³⁶, a focus which he believes is still extant in the 1990s. Because the emphasis of the 1997 book is the War years and the nineteen-twenties Corbett has to address why the radicalism of the pre-War years faded.

*If modernism is the necessary expression of, or the response to, the experience of modernity, then surely England had enough of that commodity to justify a prolonged and vigorous modernist life?*³⁷

He confronts this point historiographically by knowledgeably summarising that which this research has also identified, but which he situates much later.

*In much recent literature attempts to resolve this problem have tended to produce arguments for English art as perennially outside the mainstream ambitions of radical modernism in continental Europe and North America.*³⁸

The benefit of Corbett's revisionist thinking is one which opens up the idea that modernism does not have to equate with the progression from Cubism to abstraction, thus offering opportunities for cultural specificity, especially in a country such as England that had experienced modernity in its fullest and earliest forms. Corbett is governed by an innovative core argument that drives both of the major publications cited above.

*My contention is that the only way in which the problem of English modernism in this period can be resolved is to move beyond the concern with stylistic distinctions or a radical polarisation of modernism and other practices, and to work at the ways in which all artistic production is implicated within modernity.*³⁹

The point I wish to emphasise at this juncture is that it is these revisionary principles that Peters Corbett articulates which allow the first forty years of historiography to come into a particular focus. The embedded assumptions and inherent semantic laxness embedded in some of the early literature of the first

³⁶ Peters Corbett, D. 1997 p.1

³⁷ *ibid.* p.4.

³⁸ *ibid.* pp.4-5

³⁹ *ibid.* p.5

half of the twentieth century would have been easier to overlook if the awareness that Corbett provides had not been available.

In many ways Peters Corbett's concluding section in *'The World in Paint'*, by summarising the new thinking he is concerned to establish, throws into stark relief the intrinsic features of the narrative that had become so endemic in the literature hitherto, and which were initially laid down during the period that this historiography examines.

*English modernism can be reinserted into a wider historical context than is usually acknowledged to be the case. There are deeper connections between Vorticists and their modernist peers than normally appear, for all conduct their business through the visual surfaces of paint. The acknowledgement of paint and the exploration of its possibilities derive from a self-conscious and powerful tradition.*⁴⁰

Thus Peters Corbett argues strongly for temporal continuities in the English tradition, and, importantly for the 1910-15 time-span, there are critically neglected lateral connections across the broad spectrum of responses to modernity which the dominant narratives, dating from even the most immediate responses, largely chose to ignore.

Andrew Causey's interest in twentieth-century British art has given recent scholars a strong basis on which to explore ideas of nationality in relation to modern art. Notable for this historiography in particular are his reflections on the development of Herbert Read's career as a critic who brought awareness of a Northern European identity into a relationship with notions of Englishness in an art historical context⁴¹. Causey also emphasises that Read can be credited with re-balancing Fry's Francophilia towards a greater appreciation of German art. Causey's work on Nikolaus Pevsner, who sought to construct ideas of

⁴⁰ Peters Corbett, D. 2004 p 249.

⁴¹ See Causey, A, 'Herbert Read and Contemporary Art' in Goodway, D. (ed), in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998 pp123-144

Englishness linked to the concept of the 'the spirit of the age' or *zeitgeist*⁴² are seen as relevant to the insights Pevsner offered both in '*Pioneers of the Modern Movement*' (1936) and the way they were became more muted in *Contemporary British Art* (1951)

Lisa Tickner's scholarship is clearly in evidence in '*Modern Life and Modern subjects – British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*', published in 2000. Its approach and regard for the reception history of the art in question, expressed through five detailed case studies, is replete with historiographical evidence. Her analysis originates with the paintings and broadens to reveal important new evidence of hitherto unconsidered influences; such as the way in chapter three she explores Lewis' '*Kermesse*' via a detailed investigation of contemporary dance forms –those deriving from both 'low' and 'high' culture. Because the main text takes as its '*springboard*'⁴³ the catalogue of the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, (*Twentieth Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements*'), it is possible to note that, like Robins , the exhibition arena is still a dominant way in which, even the newest thinking on the English modernists, is constructed. In the preface Tickner is interested to explain the categorisation that Gilbert Ramsey, as the gallery's director, propounded in his exhibition catalogue introduction. He had organised the gallery into four sections;

*...one associated with Augustus John, (although John himself did not exhibit); one with Walter Sickert and The Camden Town Group; one with Bloomsbury Post-Impressionism; and one with the group around Wyndham Lewis that was just on the verge of calling itself 'Vorticist'.*⁴⁴

⁴²See Causey, A. 'Pevsner and Englishness', in Draper, P. (ed) *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, London: Ashgate, 2004

⁴³ Tickner, L. *Modern Life and Modern Subjects, British Art in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000 p. xii

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.xii

She is aware of how this established the chief infrastructure of the historical narrative from this time, but also specifies further discursive variants.

*Subsequent histories, grouping Bomberg with the Vorticists, have seen Ramsey's four categories as a series of staging-posts en route to abstraction: Sickert displaces John, Bloomsbury is chiefly triumphant around 1910-12, but Vorticism alone emerges as a movement that bears comparison with the continental avant-gardes.*⁴⁵

The reader becomes immediately aware however that Tickner is concerned to add weight and argument to the revisionism alluded to above. She goes on to say that,

*My interests are rather different. I assume that art is both a specific practice and a socially porous one, and that the aesthetic and technical ambitions of the studio were never totally severed from the other relations of everyday life.*⁴⁶

Thus this book announces its intentions to move the analysis on beyond Harrison's 'traditional closures', and to give the early modernists their due within a determinedly social history of art.

Lisa Tickner, following the five detailed case studies, offers a lengthy theoretically-slanted afterword entitled, '*Modernism and Modernity*' in which she builds towards a central tenet of her position, and exhibits an understanding of the dominant narrative, deploying a succinct summary of the historiography to demonstrate how modernism itself frequently defies consensual definition. Her concern is to make sure that revisionist histories of this period are fully cognizant of the old discursive pressures that could haunt future scholarship and she fully supports Peter Wollen's analysis of the entrenched, often coarse-grained, historical narrative.⁴⁷ My purpose in giving attention to this account by Tickner is to note its case for revisionary thinking because it highlights the

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p.12

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p.12

⁴⁷ See footnote 61. P.305 in Tickner, L. 2000

discursive re-awakening that began about two decades ago after a long critical hiatus. It is my contention that the revisionary thinking expounded by Tickner, Peters Corbett and others enables the narrative of the first forty years to be shown in relief with greater perspicacity.

Tropical Research Specificities and Findings

What follows is a specification of the chief tropical devices employed by historians and art critics examined in this survey spanning forty years. These are described below to achieve two objectives: firstly to explain the line of thinking that is more fully developed in the empirical chapters and secondly to serve as a summary of the discursive findings of the whole research exercise. I introduce this section by citing Michael Baxandall's insights into art historical language and then proceed to offer an inventory of themes and literary devices that are specific to this historiography.

In accordance with the stance that there is little to materially differentiate art criticism and art history in this very specific survey Michael Baxandall's essay '*The Language of Art Criticism*' posits a way to dissect the language of art writing that has broad pertinence. He proposes intrinsic mechanisms and common features within art criticism that are applicable to both the journalism and longer publications in this case study. He asserts that critical language is

'variously oblique or tropical' but then groups critical words *'in three rough divisions or moods'* that he titles, *'Three Kinds of Indirectness'*⁴⁸

The first division Baxandall suggests operates through comparisons, often through weak metaphor; *'rhythmic'* being an example he cites, which indeed makes many appearances in the art writing under scrutiny in later chapters. A second sub-division concerns verbal references made to the actions of the artist in making the painting, such as *'sensitive'*, or *'skilled'* and these are often, using Baxandall's third category, accompanied by words describing effects on the beholder. Baxandall instances *'imposing'*, *'striking'* and *'disturbing'*. Perhaps of greatest application to this research is the following elaboration he makes.

*Above all, there is the point that in any piece of actual art criticism all this is going on in several tiers. My examples were mainly single words, but sentences are framed within one type or another, and paragraphs and books are weighted overall towards one or another.*⁴⁹

Baxandall then identifies a further *'problem'* which concerns linearity, this being an unavoidable property of words and language as ideas are communicated.

*A picture on the other hand, or rather our perception of it, has no such inherent progression to withstand the sequence of language applied to it. An extended description of a painting is committed by the structure of language to be a progressive violation of the pattern of perceiving a painting. We do not see linearly.*⁵⁰

National Identity

In many of the critical articles, lengthy essays and art histories of English modern art there is a prevalent explanatory recourse to notions and traditions of Englishness. These references vary in their purpose ranging from the

⁴⁸ Baxandall, M. The Language of Art criticism, in Kemal, S. and Gaskell, I. (eds.) *The Language of Art History*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 1991, p69

⁴⁹ Baxandall, M. 1991, p.70

⁵⁰ Baxandall, M. 1991 p 72

laudatory to the deeply derogatory but in most instances the purpose is to suggest difference from, or occasionally resemblance to, art produced elsewhere. Firstly, it has to be recognised that the art-writing that incorporated positive and negative explanations of art by using a trope of Englishness was a response to a profound sense of nationality undergoing change and development at this time as the Empire evolved towards its final stages and society underwent huge shifts that deeply affected the lives of the working classes, women and the Establishment generally. It can be proposed that art-writing is both witness to, and purveyor of notions of national qualities that refer to these changes but which also had an internal relationship to the way domestic art had traditionally been described and valued in a narrower historiographical sense.

It is outside the remit of this research to consider in any depth the scholarship which addresses the ideas, (and causes of those ideas,) of Englishness that were current in the first half of the twentieth century. However, it is relevant to develop a critical awareness when writers from the first half of the twentieth century, often with little guile, rely on the implications of a concept of Englishness to convey opinions that range from: pride in continuity and tradition, the insularity of native artistic traditions, the lamentably weak responses to modernity, or indeed, (at other times), the culturally-specific and subtle responses to modernity. What also can be proposed at this stage is evidence of a critical divide within the primary sources that employ concepts of Englishness. In some cases the opinions are formulated from indirect, unconscious expressions of a national identity, (specific to any given decade), embedded in the writing that can subtly but emphatically be seen as determining the

writer's point of view. In other cases explicit judgements are formulated, based on crude and cursory, but well understood, stereotypes of art celebrated in England and notions of clichéd national characteristics. It is the manifestation of the positive and negative articulations of these explicit analytical benchmarks that often characterises the populist art writing and Englishness often becomes a crude catch-all signifier.

Additionally, there is a significant thematic core to this historiography that concerns admiration, or conversely, hatred of Parisian modernism both of which positions rely upon the contrastive potential of citing English art and the nature of Englishness itself. This is sometimes taken to the point where discussion of English modernism is *only* raised to serve as the proof of the pre-eminence of French achievement. However, there will also be evidence of the converse critical stance where a writer's position is clearly influenced by national loyalties, thereby showing that criticism that delved into the Englishness of English art was as subject to domestic cultural politics as to the impartiality of professional judgement. This may well have influenced the judicious way in which Pevsner, as a foreign national, almost completely avoided recent art in the lectures that were subsequently published as '*The Englishness of English Art*'.⁵¹ However, Pevsner's book is only a minor reference point in this historiography in that its hesitancy to deal with modern art in any depth is notable. Nevertheless, Pevsner does make statements about the nature of Englishness which consolidate and capture what is often expressed elsewhere much more obliquely.

⁵¹ Pevsner, N, *The Englishness of English Art – an expanded and annotated version of The Reith Lectures broadcast in Oct/Nov 1955*, London: Architectural Press, 1956

*If England seems so far incapable of leadership in twentieth century painting, the extreme contrast between the spirit of the age and English qualities is responsible.... England dislikes violence and believes in evolution.*⁵²

Pevsner's explanations of the English responses to modernity relate to the ideas that he had in common with Dagobert Frey⁵³, the Austrian art historian, acknowledged in the preface to *The Englishness of English Art*, which argue for strong European linkage and which enrich his opinions and methodology; both writers being allied to the analytical practices of Heinrich Wölfflin.⁵⁴ This example of a series of Wartime lectures, reworked in 1955, and then subsequently published, which had the hallmarks of profound art historical scholarship, is testament to an intervention of serious standing in the discourse and which is almost alone as an analysis of what directly-expressed ideas about Englishness brought to the art historical debate, albeit ideas deeply inflected by the environment of War-time and Post-War political sensibilities – but these are notably reluctant to address modern art.

Reflexivity

A further feature of the discourse that amounts to a partially realised historiographical trope is comment on the practice of criticism itself. This self-referential aspect of the narrative surfaces intermittently amid the challenges and dilemmas being presented to writers as they sought to mediate the meaning and significance of new art to new audiences. D.S.

⁵² Pevsner, 1956 p181

⁵³ Frey, D. *Englisches Wesen in der Bildenden Kunst, (English Character in The Visual Arts)*, Stuttgart and Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1942. This was part of a series, *England und Europa*. (see Vaughan essay p355)

⁵⁴ Also see Causey, A., 2004 for further analysis of Pevsner's position on national character.

MacColl is an early example. His analysis speaks of hesitancy and quandaries for the critics, rather than describing a group of writers relaxed enough to be publicly reflective about their role. However, MacColl makes a telling comment on a kind of professional panic that was present in the early criticism of modernism, and this research suggests this was also perhaps responsible for generating a lasting and profound hesitancy on this matter in the subsequent historical narrative. MacColl's assessment in 1912 seems to speak of a moment when critical judgement itself became the problem to solve.

When, a little over a year ago, Post-Impressionism burst upon the town, I was in no condition to take a hand in the vast discussion that followed. ...but I did just stagger round the Grafton gallery before I was despatched to a safe distance from work. When I left London the critics were disconcerted, but nervously determined, after so many mistakes, to be this time on the winning side. A few bravely, if wistfully, declared themselves to be fossils; some were uneasily upon the fence; the rest were practising, a little asthmatically, the phrases of an unknown tongue.⁵⁵

As this research is presented below, where there are further comments on the practice and development of art writing itself within the primary sources these will be noted. These will also be supplemented by analysis that is sensitive to broader references which explicitly address the issues of art criticism and art history and its relationship to historiography more widely. This will enable an assessment of the degree to which art writers were aware of their role and the evolving discipline of art history, and I will offer observations on the manner in which they wove these thoughts into their art writing.

⁵⁵ MacColl, D.S. *What is Art? and other papers*, London: Penguin Books, 1940. p16

Witnessing

As the following chapters will frequently observe, there is, in the historiography, a significant critical input from practising artists themselves that will require consideration as to its authority, quality and role in contributing first-hand authenticity to the wider, less personally-implicated reception mechanisms. It can also be argued that early English modernism demonstrates a very particular formation of this critical strand because of the towering presence of Wyndham Lewis whose career as a writer and an artist had, and continues to have, almost equal recognition. Others demonstrated this versatility too to a lesser extent for example, Roger Fry was a dedicated exhibiting artist, and Sickert was a prolific art critic for many years. As specific instances are highlighted it will be seen that this blurring of the production and reception of art often heavily influenced the broad debates that were put into print and this therefore has to be regarded as a notable dimension of the historiography.

Mapping of modernists

The narrative is also importantly served and scoped by the clustering of artists themselves. Before the War the exhibiting history of these groups had effectively encouraged a tripartite critical framework for critical debate comprising: a loosely defined English variant of Post-Impressionism, (often synonymous with Bloomsbury artists), a second strain of colourful and formally aware expressions of modernity centred on groupings associated with Walter Sickert usually tightly linked to the Camden Town Group exhibition history, and a third nexus of English Cubism /Futurism chiefly associated with Wyndham Lewis and his Vorticist colleagues. Where this organising principle of analysis

was *not* present a simpler recourse to an artist by artist methodology prevailed, perhaps as a safe hedging tactic against accusations of controversial and premature thematic formulations and analytical syntheses. This more pedestrian way to record modern art's emergence also allowed artists whose work was genuinely not allied to the groupings above to be acknowledged in this individualised way, Stanley Spencer being a prime example of this critical tendency. This research below gives considerable attention to the discursive evolution of debates based on group identity, and the way this is supplemented and complemented by monographic forms of critical reception.

Production, Reception and Progress

There is a cycle of art's production, public exposure and critical reception that (r)evolves through time in a manner that can appear linear and progressive to later writers looking back. Under the surface, and before retrospection sorts and sifts the past, the processes of development often reveal themselves to be a convoluted, untidy and a chaotic blend of retrograde and innovative practices that interact and thwart teleological orderliness. It is the tension between these opposing dynamics that fuels some complexity in this historiography and which necessitates a careful analysis of the tropes of linearity and progress that are often so readily deployed by the art writers in question.

Bias and Absence

There is what might be called a paradox of impartiality involved in the mission to guide the public by those who wrote about art. Neutrality is, for the most part,

enshrined and assumed in the rhetoric of writers but their enactment of this is repeatedly compromised, and systemically. Their language is frequently value-laden; their personal affiliations are often in play and the vehicles of their writing, magazines and newspapers, nearly always had official political and aesthetic leanings which individual articles do not make explicit.

What has also been apparent is another discursive pressure that bears on the central body of art criticism and art history. Carefully considered articles, essays and books that pursue a particular argument are, more often than not, supplemented by a broader promotional material such as essays in exhibition catalogues, letters to newspapers that were in response to articles and reviews, and more private debates in letters to writers after their books had been published, which gradually also became public documents. These instances, when added to the genre of highly subjective biographies and memoirs result in a corpus of material that reveals the neutral critical writing is a rare event despite implicit protestations to the contrary.

A similar blindness afflicts the realities as to the commercial aspects of art. There is what amounts to systemic denial in much art-writing that the art market is a dominant force in the relations between the production and reception of art. This timidity is over-turned in some writing but the strongest tendency is for writers to ignore worldly factors that had a bearing on artists' reputations and careers. There is an allied hesitancy too in writers being explicit about their role as impresarios mounting exhibitions and facilitating the formation of exhibiting societies. All this amounts to endemic professional shyness on the part of art writers that suggests they risked accusations of cultural philistinism, and vested interests if their comments referred too closely to the quotidian aspects of the art world.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explain its methodology and define its focus so that the assemblage of evidence in chapters 2 to 5 can flow chronologically. It is the aim of this historiography that it also brings some further context to the scholarship of recent years that has addressed English modernism, which I have also summarised in this chapter. My final section has put more specificity into the analytical issues and findings of this research project, that were introduced earlier in the chapter, in the hope that the discursive patterns within the evidence offered below is clearer and more coherent.

*One must try to get behind or beneath the presuppositions which sustain a given type of enquiry and ask the questions that can be begged in its practice in the interest of determining why this type of enquiry has been designed to solve the problems it characteristically tries to solve.*⁵⁶

⁵⁶ White, H. *Tropics of Discourse*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 p81

Chapter Two

Inception and Reception

To the student or amateur, modern art seems a hopeless tangle. ... Much of the work, he can see, is good; not a little of it appears to him, if he dare confess it, rather better than a great deal that is sanctified by the names of the Old Masters; much of it, on the other hand, he finds himself unable to appreciate and understand, because there has been no-one to map out the country for him, so to speak, to mark out the boundaries of its distinct, if often overlapping, districts, to explain to him its chief features, and in general to show him the way about it.¹

This was how the anonymous author of an article in the *Burlington Magazine* regarded the contemporary art scene in England in 1907. The writer both identified a prevailing cultural bewilderment and also seemed to accurately prefigure a fast-approaching period unlikely to be critically equipped for the major shift in domestic art practice. That stage is customarily inaugurated by most historical accounts in 1910 when the exhibition mounted by Roger Fry, '*Manet and The Post-Impressionists*' was held at the Grafton Galleries. This chapter charts the first phase of the historiography concerning the 1910-14 period which focuses specifically on the debates and selected contexts in which immediate responses to new English art and 'isms' were articulated.

The body of primary material pertaining to this chapter was not in any sense written as history, rather it is contemporary commentary prompted in the main by art exhibitions mounted in London. These cultural events stimulated articles and reviews and a few hastily published books which together created an exploratory and inevitably inchoate new wave of views about modern art,

¹ *THE CASE FOR MODERN PAINTING BY A MODERN PAINTER*, in *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 48 no. xi 1907. This article although prompted by an exhibition of the International Society chose to range widely, offering an insight into the critical pressures facing those who sensed a pivotal moment in art history.

occasionally enriched by intellectually robust analysis. The modern art in question was predominantly the art of continental modernists interspersed with that produced in England, and occasionally Scotland. However as the specific focus of this research is English modern painting the wider context is only referenced in relative terms to pursue my narrower objective. I want to suggest that the art writing at this juncture can be regarded as *embryonic* history, if it proves to be the case in this researched survey, that the originating material has had lasting impact and influence. The idea I am adopting of immediate art criticism and commentary as proto-history can be tested by examining the congruence between the initial ideas and opinions and the extent to which they are then reiterated and rehearsed over several decades. If indeed there are strong repetitions in the judgements of writers, as the archives of critical writing are examined decade by decade, then the strength of the originating arguments can be regarded as in one sense successfully conceived. In another sense it is also possible that this same tenacious consensus can be regarded as critical weakness if later writers did little to revisit founding views that were so hurriedly forged in a febrile critical environment. Either way, if there are powerful vestiges of the pre-War discourse in evidence as contemporary art-writing gives way to accounts of recent history, then the importance of the early stage of opinion forming is intrinsic to this historiography.

Despite the working assumption of temporal connectivity proposed above the analysis I offer in this chapter is aware that the primary material operated in a distinctive polemical register, largely governed by the journalism of the pre-War period and the promotional writing associated with the chief exhibitions. The critical tropes, signalled in the introductory chapter, which at times become clichés in this corpus of writing, will be identified as discursive features of the

founding cultural response to the emergence of English modern art. In subsequent decades these tropical themes recur and so will be analysed in terms of their discursive evolution to ascertain their on-going impact on cultural consensus and canon formation. However, in the decades after the Great War the historiography is much more diverse, (books, essays in the periodical press, autobiographies, memoirs and scholarly art history), so it will become appropriate to expand out in subsequent chapters from the narrower tropical perspective of this chapter towards a wider theoretical viewpoint that also addresses the formation of historical paradigms and narratives.

Before directly surveying the years immediately following 1910 I summarise below the critical legacy of the previous twenty years which had given a tentative basis for the new discourse on modern art to develop. My evidence base will then focus on the primary evidence that demonstrates that there were persistent, endemic and sometimes limiting discursive tropes extant in the immediate pre-War years which compromised the capacity to establish a coherent response to modernism. Having selectively charted the scope, the mechanisms and major archives of the art writing, the final section considers the debate more meta-theoretically summarising the tropical elements in the discourse which have been excavated in the contemporary archives. Hayden White, as a theoretician of historiography, has provided a defining methodological outlook on this primary material; his assertion that historical narratives have a particular struggle in their early stages to establish a discursive terrain and cultural consensus is particularly relevant.

This, (referring to genuine discourse) is especially the case when it is a matter of trying to mark out what appears to be a new era of human experience for preliminary analysis, define its contours, identify the elements in its field, and discern the kinds of relationships that obtain among them. It is here that discourse must establish the adequacy of the language used in analyzing the field to the objects that appear to occupy it. And discourse effects this adequation by a prefigurative move that is more tropical than logical.² (White's emphasis)

White also advises that,

When we seek to make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society and history, we never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely what we say. Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image we are trying to fashion of them.³

So, it is my working principle in assembling representative material for this chapter that White's analysis creates a basis for identifying the tropes with which writers used to construct their judgements. It will be argued evidentially below that as writers attempted to build an informed critique of modern art their efforts were refracted through tropical lenses the chief of which were: comfortable and uncomfortable notions of English cultural specificity, helpful and unhelpful delineations of artistic styles that amounted to a mapping exercise, and a largely unconscious urge to judge work firmly within an assumption of the progressive linearity of art history. Whether this effort by a small number of individual writers actively interested in modern art amounted to the beginnings of a strong and lasting collective paradigm will also be considered at the end of this chapter.

² White, H. *Tropics of Discourse, Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 p.1.

³ *ibid.* p.1

Critical legacy and Context

In the twenty years or so before 1910, shifts in art practice, exhibition opportunities and the resultant analysis of critics were together all implicated in the beginnings of a new discourse concerning modern art in England. However, awareness of this change was operating within an environment which still valued traditional English aesthetic values and which was also part of a larger sociological ethos that frequently warned that only gradual change was the preferred pace of progress in a sensible (rather than revolutionary) country such as England. French Impressionism had been exhibited in England since 1870, and this had gradually stimulated new ways to debate the merit of art that did not seek to convey a narrative nor which sought mimetic excellence. 'The New Critics', notably D.S. MacColl, writing in *The Spectator*, George Moore in *The Speaker*, and R.A.M. Stevenson, as eloquent apologists of Degas, and French Impressionism more generally, were the central players. Maureen Borland, in her biography of MacColl, demonstrates that during 1893, a highly turbulent year for art criticism, a head-on clash between 'The Philistine' writing in *The Westminster Gazette*, and the MacColl/Moore faction took place in which their differences were paraded and which captures the controversies of the time.⁴

Durand-Ruel mounted exhibitions at least sixteen times in various galleries until 1905, bringing Impressionism to London in some volume.⁵ Other exhibiting societies such as The International Society, The New English Art Club, and The Royal Society of British Artists regularly included work by Monet, Degas, and Renoir. However, in March 1893, the newly opened Grafton Galleries showed

⁴ See pp75-85 in Borland, M. *D.S. MacColl, Painter, Poet, Art Critic*, Harpenden: Lennard Publishing, 1995.

⁵ See Flint, K. (ed.) *Impressionists in England, The Critical Reception*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

'*L'Absinthe*' (1876) [fig. 1] and, '*The Rehearsal*' (c. 1877-9) by Degas which prompted the long critical altercation referred to above, which apart from verifying the highly turbulent critical discourse also demonstrates the polarised views of those who espoused 'The New Criticism' and those traditionalists who were dubbed, 'Philistines'.

George Moore in '*The Speaker*' and D.S. MacColl in '*The Spectator*' had lauded *L'Absinthe*.

*It sets a standard by which too many of the would-be 'decorative' inventions in the exhibition are cruelly judged. It is what they call 'a repulsive subject,' two rather sodden people drinking in a café... Degas understands his people absolutely; there is no false note of an imposed and blundering sentiment, but exactly as a man with a just eye and comprehending mind and power of speech could set up that scene for us in the deft words, whose mysterious relations of idea and form, of colour, watch 'til the table-tops and the mirror and the water-bottle and the drinks and the features yield up to him their mysterious affecting note.*⁶

The tolerant and yet provocative premise in this quotation, I suggest, captures a germinating moment in the discursive journey within England to propose meaning in non-traditional subjects and non-traditional treatments but still shows a predisposition to the descriptive power and flow of quasi-narrative commentary within critiques of the visual. It also provides an articulate linkage between the critics who had to find '*deft words*' and the artists who were exploring '*mysterious relations*'. However, the immediate reaction to these subtleties was strident and negative, chiefly in the *Westminster Gazette*, written as '*The Philistine's Response*' – probably by John Alfred Spender, who had the approval of the editor, Edward Tyas Cook.

How strange one thinks, that our friend the Spectator, so moral and so reputable in all other relations of life, should lend itself to this threnody over a picture of, 'two rather sodden people drinking in a café' ! Critics have in times past talked a great deal of rhapsodical nonsense about

⁶ D.S. MacColl in *The Spectator*, 25th February 1893

*pictures that in spite of it all remain classic and beautiful; but is there anything in the whole literature of the subject quite to touch this about the 'mysterious affecting note' of table-tops, mirrors, water-bottles and drink?*⁷

This interchange was only the beginning and further insults and ripostes were published and the argument widened to include Harry Quilter, MacColl's predecessor at the *Spectator*, who chose to question MacColl's accuracy, analysis and competence and, as his rhetoric intensified, lambasted all those of a younger generation associated with '*The New Criticism*'.

*... it has been reserved for me in the last few months to discover in journal after journal articles professedly devoted to criticism which are nothing but the misinterpretations of the art with which they deal and the artists whose work are mentioned.*⁸

It became evident that factions were forming; Walter Crane and William Richmond supported the 'Philistines' and Charles Furse backed MacColl. Despite the unseemly wrangling as new ideas and attitudes emerged MacColl remained composed and immediately wrote of his aspiration with gravitas in *The Spectator* emphasising the renewal process in the long trajectory of western art and subtly deploying the trope of progress that would ensure an orderly process of canon formation.

*It is simply the attempt to apply to current art the same standards which we apply to ancient art, to disengage from the enormous stream of picture-producers the one or two contemporary masters who are worthy to be named beside the ancients, the one or two promising talents that may some day deserve the same praise...*⁹

By the early years of the new century further efforts were being made to up-date critical language to suit contemporary art. The Durand-Ruel exhibition of 1905 at the Grafton Galleries which chiefly showed work by Manet, Monet, Pissarro and Degas also included ten pictures by Cézanne. This marks a moment when

⁷ *Westminster Gazette*, 9th March 1893

⁸ *Westminster Gazette*, 9th March 1893

⁹ D.S. MacColl in *The Spectator*, 18th March 1893

new ideas were even more urgently needed. However, the pictures by Cézanne were largely ignored in the exhibition reviews. A hint of critical hesitancy can be detected in the anonymous review in *The Times* of January 17th 1905 which avoids any risky classification and plays safe with the headline, '*French Art at The Grafton Galleries*'. The writer however reveals his preferences and greater professional comfort when describing, at length, Renoir and Manet but is clearly much more reluctant to comment on Cézanne. '*On M. Cézanne, the still-life painter, ... we need not dwell*'¹⁰ being his only comment. This avoidance speaks of the moment before the ideas of Julius Meier-Graefe had been introduced through the translation in 1908 into English of '*Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*'¹¹, and the influential essay by Roger Fry, '*An Essay in Aesthetics*' published in *The New Quarterly* in April 1909 that derived, in part, from the German's ideas.

As Christopher Reed points out¹² Fry's landmark essay had been heralded by a lecture he gave at Oxford University in 1908 titled, '*Expression and Representation in The Graphic Arts*', the unpublished text of which illustrates the awareness he was developing of the tension between decorative and formal properties of modern art and, also perhaps the more fundamental idea, that the new visual language had the power to channel and stimulate raw emotion. This idea would find its fullest expression in '*An Essay in Aesthetics*'. Reed makes an argument that the theoretical essays and lectures Fry produced in these years immediately prior to 1910 were not given great attention until a concrete manifestation of the art he was trying to comprehend became available to the general public.

10 *The Times*, January 17th, 1905 p.6

11 Originally published in German in 1904

12. Reed, C. (Ed) *A Roger Fry Reader*, London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p48

*Typically, what captured the art world's attention was not theory in the raw, but the unconventional applications the theory made possible. It was the controversy surrounding Fry's 1910 exhibit, Manet and the Post-Impressionists, that catapulted his theories to the center of the public arena.*¹³

Peters Corbett also comments on the pivotal moment of Fry's important essay but is concerned to alert the reader to the continuities of the Victorian critical heritage he believes to be built into Fry's argument which he sees as having strong conceptual links to Aestheticism.¹⁴

In terms of a full understanding of the art world prior to 1910 the importance of *The Allied Artists' Association* must be acknowledged. This was inaugurated by Frank Rutter in 1907 as a response to the un-juried French 'Salon des Indépendants' and he found immediate support for the project from Walter Sickert, Spencer Gore and Harold Gilman. The venue for the yearly exhibitions was The Albert Hall; in the first year over three thousand paintings were shown, and in the second year over one thousand, most of which were by British artists. These exhibitions were widely reviewed and provided many writers with an opportunity to demonstrate their critical faculties and aesthetic allegiances. *The Art News*, launched in 1909 and edited by Rutter, became the official journal of the A.A.A. and this self-declared, '*...first art newspaper in the United Kingdom*' is important to an understanding of the range of publications where contemporary art was discussed. Frank Rutter's sensitivity to the mediating function of critics is directly addressed in the edition of 7th July, 1910, in an editorial titled, '*The Function of Criticism*' demonstrating his awareness of the transaction required to launch and promote new art.

¹³ *ibid.* p49

¹⁴ See Peters Corbett, D., 2004 p.227.

The Ideal critic would be the writer who could combine sympathetic instruction of the artist with sound guidance of the general public.

It is clear that exposure to critical acclaim or critical disaster took place in an environment where other art debates were also fertile and active; notably the reception of continental modern art. Art from abroad was increasingly introduced in regular exhibitions which caused excitement resulting in both discursive support and also dismay. The intellectual climate was also keen, as has been remarked on above, to posit new conceptual arguments as to the causes, methods and merits of modern art and these grew in importance as serious writers such as T.E. Hulme, Huntly Carter, and Frank Rutter developed their passion for, and conceptual thinking about, modern art.

Of particular substance to the diversity of settings in which intellectual ideas about art and painting were debated is the category of the '*Little Magazine*' which, at this period, entered wholeheartedly into celebrating and promoting modernism's visual and literary endeavours. Many scholarly studies have been made of these various publications in terms of their content, history and significance¹⁵, and it is beyond the remit of this thesis to add to this work, however, the role that '*Rhythm*' (1911-13) and '*The New Age*' (1907-22) played to enliven discussion about modern art and the extent to which English exponents featured in their content can be nominated to represent an important and intellectually rigorous strand within the contemporary literature.

'*The New Age*', a socialist magazine with modernist interests, had an arguably authoritative place in the array of magazines, deriving from its stated policy not to separate the political and cultural agendas into discrete spheres, and a clear commitment to include many articles that were far from supportive of the

¹⁵ See *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* for a comprehensive survey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009

modernists, despite being a key dissemination vehicle for important modern art theorists such as T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound. This editorial policy of balance and a broad inclusiveness is captured in its aim to offer '*some neutral ground where intelligences may meet on equal terms.*'¹⁶ This of course throws into relief those publications which were proud to be partisan, such as *Rhythm* (see below). In contrast, the *New Age's* editor from 1907 to 1922, A. R. Orage, made serious efforts to identify absurd '*theories, fads and charlatanism*'¹⁷. The offices of '*The New Age*' were centrally located in Holborn, near to the leading galleries and this proximity translates into a clear trend in the exhibitions that were reported on - very rarely were any exhibitions referred to that took place outside London, a fact that accentuates the London-centric nature of these early debates on modern art.

Huntly Carter, who had strong interests in modern art and drama, began writing in '*The New Age*' in November 1909. His contributions in 1910, prior to Fry's first post-Impressionist exhibition, illuminate and capture aspects of the debate in the months that pre-dated November 1910. In the edition of 31st March 1910 Carter announces that the magazine will soon be issuing

...art Supplements written entirely by painters, and in this manner proposes to throw open a road to artists for that free and frank expression of their claims which they are denied in every other journal.... They are especially invited to torture their critics, and to dot the landscape with bodies – not their own.

The first of these supplements published the following week, does not quite live up to the excitable announcement of the previous edition but nevertheless is true to the impartiality '*The New Age*' espoused in that it contains a strong representation by those who sought to chide modern artists and to continue

16 'To Our Readers,' *The New Age* 2,6 (25th April 1908) 503

17 'R.H.C. Readers and Writers' *The New Age* 13,14 (July 31st 1913) 393

celebrating tradition. Carter, as editor of the supplement, somewhat ruefully, admits this leaning in his introductory paragraphs. Of three of his contributors Carter says,

*Both Mr. Shackleton, Mr. French, and Mr. Reynolds are in revolt against certain methods of the moderns, and strongly declare for a return to the original sources of inspiration.*¹⁸

His handling of these traditional points of view reveals his liberal standpoint.

*A genuine reaction which is a revolt against tyranny or stupidity is always to be welcomed. It adds a new impulse to Art and strengthens the springs of originality and productiveness. It is chiefly in this direction, that I believe, that these three painters are reactionaries.*¹⁹

Carter is unambiguous and enthusiastic in his review of the New English Art Club (NEAC) exhibition two months later on June 9th. He clearly offers support and admiration for the 'colourists' in this exhibition making particular mention of Spencer Gore whom he says has huge potential and promise as shown in '*Rule Britannia*'. [Fig 2.] Similarly he praises Robert Bevan, Lucien Pissarro and Harold Gilman and asserts their ability to breathe new life into NEAC through their commitment to the way, '*they conceive and express subject in colour*'.²⁰

However, in July 1910 Carter rails against the indifference of English men and women, (the text implies) whom he calls '*bloodless*' and says, '*they have lost the power to be passionate and sincere.*' This is a shock tactic that opens his review of the A.A.A. exhibition and the reader is led to understand that it is artists, critics *and* audiences who lack energy and zest. However, Carter's remonstration lessens as he lists the English artists who meet his challenge by naming those who, '*are in love with their work...*'

18 *The New Age*, 31st March, 1910, p.2

19 *ibid.* p.2

20 *The New Age*, June 9th, 1910.p. 135

*All these artists are expressing their temperaments in moods that I like. My own mood was to have been severely critical. But I have set it aside in order to mention work which justifies the encouragement of the A.A.A.*²¹

Much can be deduced from this article about Carter's desire to identify signs of a break with the mediocrity of the recent past, despite his frustrations about English artistic cowardice. He grasps his role to move taste forward and find a way to identify positive change and progress. This set of reviews and opinions by Carter, published in *The New Age* at this pivotal stage, demonstrate a discourse at a turning point. Apologists for modern art were learning to tentatively marshal their arguments and to diplomatically handle those who resisted change, and glimpses of their professional introspection as to these challenges can be discerned.

'*Rhythm*' did not appear until 1911, and as was suggested in the previous chapter, was conceived by Michael Sadleir and John Middleton Murry as a publication that would unequivocally champion modernism; both literary and artistic, with a particular passion for post-Impressionism. However, in English terms, this was the post-Impressionism of the 'Rhythmists' that J.D. Fergusson effectively led, and which owed closest allegiance to the Paris Fauves. This editorial stance unsurprisingly dictated the rhetoric and inclinations of this 'little magazine'. It is also, importantly for the chronology of the historiography under question, noted by Faith Binckes,²² that Murry and Fergusson began planning the magazine and its ideological position in 1910 in Paris, an ideological position derived from Bergson's theories of *élan vital*.

The third edition of '*Rhythm*', published in Winter 1911,(coincident with the first Grafton Galleries exhibition),featured an article by C.J.Holmes, languidly titled

21 Huntly Carter, 'ART', *The New Age* July 28th 1910, pp306-7

22 Binckes, F., 'Lines of Engagement: Rhythm and Early Modernism', in Churchill S.W. and McKible, A. (eds.) *Little Magazines and Modernism – New Approaches*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, p22.

'*Stray Thoughts on Rhythm in Painting*'²³ in which he attempts to expound on this concept and is at pains to connect the rhythm of painting to the rhythm of poetry. He also finds it possible to distinguish rhythm in the '*general design*' of a picture and '*its individual parts*'.²⁴ His main concern is to warn against the overuse of colour repetition "*as not infrequently occurs in 'Impressionist' and 'Post-Impressionist' work.*"²⁵ At this stage, it can be noted that already the modern exemplars for this short theoretical piece are emphatically not English. Gauguin is the model held up for his successful '*larger and less equal masses*'²⁶ – (of colour) in his painting.

A highly defensive editorial piece of writing concludes this edition of *Rhythm*, in which it is made clear that, despite recent criticism, their conviction as a magazine is strong. This is a risky editorial tactic but clearly a moment to be bold. It is possible to discern that it was becoming feasible for those in the specialist press, who championed modern art to square up to the traditionalists and believe in their own rhetorical powers.

*The men who try to do something new for the most part starve. They can only win to success by unity, by helping their best friends and neglecting petty differences. If we all have the same idea of revitalizing art, it matters not one straw against the great question whether we deal with the same tailor, or use our colours a little differently.*²⁷

23 Holmes, C.J. in *Rhythm*, Winter 1911, p.2

24 *ibid.* p.2.

25 *ibid.* p.2-3

26 *ibid.* p.3

27 Editorial, *Rhythm*, Winter 1911 p.36

The Reception Discourse of 1910-1914

This central section of this chapter orders and selects its evidence in recognition of the fact that immediate responses to art shown in exhibitions, despite being raw and tentative, had a crucial role in the formation of taste and arguably laid down the first adumbrations of the art historical narratives that inevitably influenced subsequent writers. At this juncture art criticism addressing the contemporary scene gave much concerted attention and energy to the late arrival of Continental modern art as major exhibitions were mounted, and the same critics simultaneously took the responsibility to assess and understand the work of recent radical English painting that was also launched into the public domain, either in mixed exhibitions or in more discrete settings during these feverish years of change. The result is an archive of art writing that has raw intensity and whose legacy, I will argue in later chapters, was curiously persistent. Using this historiographic resource I now turn to survey in some detail how writers and critics variously positioned English contemporary art as it was presented to the viewing public in these years of change and experimentation. Endemic themes and tropes identified as this commentary develops will gradually expose and encourage a particular kind of analytical sensitivity which will in turn establish a perspective with which to trace the historiography through the literature of later decades.

Of all pressures placed upon cultural commentators charged with responding to the new and different at this time, it was the wisdom and judgement of hindsight that was most desired. Journalists and art writers knew, and frequently said, that the task they set themselves when commenting on the contemporary scene

would always be beset with problems and dilemmas that only time would resolve. The years 1910-15 illustrate this very emphatically as critics were forced to handle the seeming rupture with the past in ways which disrupted their critical certainties and called into question their rhetorical techniques. It cannot be overstated that critical responses to newly exhibited art had a binary complexity which caused critical dilemmas that were hard to resolve. The modern art that had seemingly just reached Britain in large doses from the Continent caused a profound discursive stir and this incursion was hard to handle alongside a second strand, namely the work of British artists who, according to many accounts, had only recently and enthusiastically discovered and adopted modern techniques and subjects.

Audiences too were disturbed as they encountered the new art imported from abroad. They were simultaneously, and somewhat confusingly, obliged to comprehend the muted, but still shocking more recent work produced by English exponents of modern art. Critics were aware of this cultural confluence, again and again saying that it was too soon to assess and pronounce on lasting value and timeless excellence, often retreating into bemused and derogatory rhetoric. It is clear that at this particular juncture, just before the War, the imperative to respond to innovative cultural phenomena carried particular professional risks for critics and this coincided with the reactionary instincts of many newspapers and journals eager to ridicule the unfamiliar as Edwardian values were stubbornly clung to. This unconfident conservatism, when allied to the inter-locking activities of a tight-knit art world where writers, painters, and exhibition impresarios played interchangeable roles, created the likelihood that debate would falter and a mature discourse would be late in coming.

Fortunately for the critics the groups of artists who showed their work together supplied classifying short-cuts and easy routes to delineate and differentiate the new ideas in painting technique and subject matter. Whilst the *Allied Artists' Association* had pioneered an open and eclectic exhibiting opportunity, the emergence of a tidier but shifting array of exhibiting groups provided a helpful taxonomy to guide written responses to English modernists. The reviews of these exhibitions are highly conditioned by the stylistic boundaries seemingly offered by the groupings themselves. Exhibiting groups such as The Friday Club, the Camden Town Group, The Grafton Group, The London Group, (from March 1914), and later the Vorticists became ready-made, and therefore manageable sub-categories of modern art, and these categories, justifiably or not, frequently determined the configuration of the evolving narrative. This ready-made mapping of new English modern art was a welcome aid to understanding and was enthusiastically embraced by many critics. However, the integrity of this delineated landscape is at times queried by critics who occasionally rejected the visual coherence of artists who exhibited together. In the case of the Camden Town Group *The Times'* critic who reviewed their third exhibition at the Carfax Gallery on December 9th 1912 sharply noted,

*One cannot say of The Camden Town Group that they have anything in common, except the Carfax gallery in which they exhibit.*²⁸

The cause of this confusion is focussed more precisely three days later by P.G.Konody writing in *The Observer* – who singled out Lewis' individuality with sharp impatience. Lewis' style is clearly seen as anomalous within the group.

*Mr Wyndham Lewis continues to worship at the shrine of Cubism, or rather, 'Spherism' in a lamentably unintelligible diagram entitled 'Danse'*²⁹

²⁸ *The Times*, December 9th, 1912. p.9

²⁹ Konody, P.G., in *The Observer*, December 22nd, 1912. *Danse* is now lost.

It is worth noting more generally that the visual techniques that Lewis and other Cubist- influenced artists developed often disrupted critical judgements as their exhibition environments confused the map-makers of modern art, although the most knowledgeable critics invariably recognised Lewis' original talent. It was not until June 1915 at the Doré Gallery that the Vorticists, led by Lewis, coalesced formally as an exhibiting group – up until this point their work had been integrated in the exhibiting environment and clearly experienced difficulties in establishing critical identity typically being described as a variant of Futurism or Cubism. Historiographically their inception is problematic in that to launch themselves as a group in 1914 as War loomed was inevitably unlikely to bring forth well-crafted estimations of their group effort. The following year their work was shown at The London Group exhibition in March 1915 and their only group exhibition mounted in June 1915 at the Doré Gallery³⁰, which largely showed works from 1913 and 1914 - and which are now mostly lost. This chronology led to questionable critical conflation as critics patriotically sought over-enthusiastically to identify premonitions and artistic expression that were prescient of War. In terms of the development of the chief exponents it is plain that their style, and statements of visual philosophy, firmly *pre-date* the War and moreover their style cannot be fully explained by artistic foresight of world events. However, when the journalism of exhibition reviews and many subsequent and more substantial accounts of recent history were published the critical legacy of the Vorticists was deeply refracted by the War. The way in

30 Wees, 1972, identifies the relevant exhibitors as follows. *The London Group, March 1915*; Lewis, Wadsworth, Roberts, Gaudier-Brzeska, Epstein and Nevinson. p.200. In the First Vorticist Exhibition of June 1915 Wees says, "Large posters advertising the exhibition and tickets to the opening identified the Vorticists as 'Etchells, Brzeska, Roberts, Wadsworth, Wyndham Lewis, Dismorr, Saunders'. Bernard Adeney, Lawrence Atkinson, David Bomberg, Duncan Grant, Jacob Kramer and C.R.W. Nevinson were included as artists 'invited to show' with the Vorticists." p. 201.

which early expressions of Vorticist art before the War and was critically received is addressed in this chapter. The reception by journalists and writers after the formation of The Vorticist Group in 1914 is chiefly addressed in the next chapter.

I have argued that the critical legacy stimulated by exhibiting groups is central to the literature, particularly to the urge to chart a reassuring and orderly landscape as modern art proliferated, but views were also formulated in the wake of solo exhibitions too. Augustus John, Sickert and Fry in particular were sufficiently privileged to have this opportunity but there were also other mixed settings in which artists exhibited their work and these also played a formative part in prompting thoughtful reviews that were less confined by group identity.³¹

The second Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1912, organised by Roger Fry and close associates, has a special position in the four year period in question because this was a key, high-profile exhibition where French, Russian and English art³² [Figs 3, 4, 5] was shown in close proximity. The reviews and wider critical responses are able to demonstrate how English art fared in relative terms, inevitable in this kind of exhibiting intimacy. This exhibition stimulated a huge volume of debate and reaction in many periodicals and newspapers at the time and, significantly for this research focus, it has to be said, the majority of this ignored the English section of the exhibition. Of

31 Examples of these exhibiting arrangements were; the on-going annual A.A.A. exhibitions, the invitation shows at The Grafton Galleries, (Oct-Jan 1911-12, *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*), the Doré Gallery (Nov. 1913, *Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition*), and at Brighton Public Art Galleries, (Dec./Jan. 1913-4, *English Post-Impressionists, Cubists and Others*.) What can be regarded as a highly significant landmark exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, (May/June 1914, *Twentieth century Art – a Review of the Modern Movements*), created something of a climax to these modern but eclectic vehicles of public exposure before the War.

32 The work of Vanessa Bell, Frederick Etchells, Jessie Etchells, Fry, Gill, Spencer Gore, Grant, Lamb, Lewis and Spencer was shown. Augustus John declined Clive Bell's invitation to exhibit.

course this omission is telling and speaks of the fact that the glare of modern foreign art dazzled and pre-occupied the critics³³

A discursive significance should also be attached to the promotional essays in exhibition literature, Roger Fry's general introduction to the exhibition catalogue, and Clive Bell's introduction to, '*The English Group*' deserve attention. As will be seen, these short introductory pieces frequently set the critical agenda, both positively and negatively. Roger Fry's opening comments offer an emphatic statement which spans the whole international scene. Lauding post-Impressionism's '*native place*' – France - and welcoming developments in England and Russia he then moves to justify the rationale for limiting his exhibition.

*Post-Impressionist schools are flourishing, one might say almost raging, in Switzerland, Austro-Hungary and most of all in Germany. But so far as I have discovered these have not yet added any positive element to the general stock of ideas.*³⁴

Herein is evident Roger Fry's unwillingness to consider art outside his Francophile leanings and the highly fashionable Russian influences in the London of the time. Whilst concurring with the exhibition itself this prejudice diminishes his grasp of the modern movement internationally.

Clive Bell's introduction to the English section strengthens the importance of this publication as a seminal catalogue in the historiography. It announces the notion of '*significant form*' as the governing idea of why the hall-marks of post-Impressionism had profound innovative meaning and this is coupled to his confidence in the strides English artists had recently made, although the more negative idea that catching up was necessary still lurks in the shadows of his

33 See Gruetzner Robins, A. 1997 p89

34 Quoted in Bullen, J.B. 1988, p348

enthusiasm. Nevertheless the assuredness that '*the battle is won*' is an assertion indicative of the cultural progress he feels has been made.

*New wine abounded and the old bottles were found wanting*³⁵, is the metaphor that Bell uses to build his rallying cry claiming that there is a new realisation that, '*What does this picture represent?*' has been supplanted by '*What does it make us feel?*' The Biblical reference is hard-hitting and of course intentionally negates any value in art that preceded the step-change he is so jubilant about. This is unequivocally the language of rupture or a '*spiritual revolution*' as he puts it.

Bell propounds his most ardently held view that, '*Their debt to the French is enormous*' – a double-edged compliment for English artists that must not always have been welcomed by those such as Wyndham Lewis, although Bell does reserve special words of praise for him as he builds his peroration on '*plastic values*' and significant form. This introduction by Bell detaches all previous art from the achievements on show at the Grafton Galleries and praises the exhibition's commitment to the paintings '*which proclaims art a religion*'.³⁶

Reviewers of this exhibition doubtless felt challenged by Bell's assertive arguments of French precedent and his effusive praise of Lewis, Grant and Fry himself. His melodramatic denial of the worth of English art for '*the two centuries*', previous to this revolution, is used to suggest their even greater achievement in recent years.

35 *ibid.* p.349

36 *ibid.* p.349

*It is just because these Englishmen have expelled or reduced to servitude those romantic and irrelevant qualities that for two centuries have made our art the laughing-stock of Europe, that they deserve as much respect and almost as much attention as superior French artists who have had no such traditional difficulties to surmount.*³⁷

Bell's overwhelming commitment to the new order of painting in this exhibition catalogue essay is clearly extreme and it spurred strongly Franco-phile analysis to continue fuelling the critical agenda. English artists are praised for their valiant efforts, but Bell believes, '*No one of understanding...will deny the superiority of the Frenchmen.*' It would take subtle efforts from less bombastic writers to mitigate this critical harshness in order to establish native merit and the gentler concept of lineage in home-grown modern art.

P.G. Konody's long review of this exhibition in *The Observer* opens by expressing agreement with Bell's introduction and reinforces the weakness of English Post-Impressionism in comparison with its '*French root*'. He then offers a negative full-blooded critique but one that does not simply reiterate Bell's French/English relativism.

*Wherever the English pictures are grouped together on one wall they appear dull and almost colourless compared with the surrounding orgies in primaries.*³⁸

This is in fact a hard knock to the restrictive choices that Bell, and Fry of course, made to construct this exhibition. Konody was keen, it seems, to highlight their factionally-derived avoidance of Peploe and J.D.Fergusson and their exhibiting companions at the Stafford Gallery who according to Konody,

*apply the new principles as passionately and fearlessly as their French fellow-workers.*³⁹

37 *ibid.* p.350

38 Konody P.G.in *The Observer*, October 27th, 1912

39 *ibid.*

Duncan Grant's work received a particularly prolonged and negative critique that draws from the usual proposition that the purported English post-Impressionism is far removed from the French achievement. Grant's *Queen of Sheba* is relegated to being a '*charming piece of decoration*' and the tone is dismissive and final,

...in 'The Dancers' Mr Grant wrestles unsuccessfully with a problem triumphantly solved by Matisse in his large decorative panel in the end room. [Fig 6]

Letchworth Station [Fig 7] by Spencer Gore fares better and this section of the review is capped by an aside from Konody which speaks of his awareness of the emerging critical lexicon that gives almost exclusive importance to the emotional significance of modern art, and which is also a rare self-referential acknowledgement of discursive adaptations that were required by the new art.

Everything, (in the picture) is concentrated on that 'spiritual significance' that has entered into the jargon of Post-Impressionist criticism. ⁴⁰

An unsigned review in *The Connoisseur* also maintains a tone of patronising faint praise which reveals the well-worn rhetoric which could not conceive of any real radicalism being produced by an English artist; something that Bell had confronted directly. There is in the languid tone a signal that *The Connoisseur* critic has made up his mind to find only lacklustre qualities in the new work. This piece also, of course, evidences the tenacity of a critical consensus once it is established and the way in which this consensus extends its influence through recourse to dismissive wit.

40 *ibid.*

The most able of the English artists represented are still shivering on the brink of heterodoxy, unable to divest themselves of all the results of their previous training and plunge boldly in, but careful to introduce some Post-Impressionist feature in their work to show, if they have not been immersed in the doctrines of the new cult, they have received a sprinkling.

41

This style can be contrasted to the fulsome and slightly crazed efforts produced in response to the first Post-Impressionist exhibition by T.B.Hyslop in a lecture to the Art Workers' Guild and published in the *Nineteenth Century* in February 1911 wherein he suggested modern artists were 'degenerates'⁴².

What can be discerned from the more subtle yet damning style in *The Connoisseur* instanced above, which can also be found in many other reviews, is perhaps a tone that is representative of the calmer but nevertheless critical widespread disdain afforded to domestic post-Impressionists. It is perhaps also possible to identify at this stage an emerging and irretrievable tipping point at this point in the historiography, as recurring expressions of negative critical relativism became entrenched.

Rupert Brooke's review of this exhibition published in *The Cambridge Magazine* takes its time to get to an analysis of the English section. He finds the work 'refreshing' but asks and answers a question, "' Can we hold our own yet in modern art?' 'The answer is 'No!'"⁴³ Thus the ranking of modern art is still clearly drawn up with little contribution from England. His mockery of the national deficiency is sarcastically and wittily couched.

41 *The Connoisseur*, November 1912, p.191

42 Reprinted in Bullen, J.B. 1988., pp209-222

43 Rupert Brooke in *The Cambridge Magazine*, 23rd November 1912.

*English art has moved beyond the stage of a few years ago when a simple recipe for producing a picture throbbing with 'lyrical beauty' was to depict a human figure, (preferably female) with one or both arms uplifted in unusual attitudes.*⁴⁴

This is the rhetoric of a critic who knows that the cause is lost and that wry self-deprecation is the only defence mechanism. He does however reserve much praise for Spencer's, *John Donne arriving in Heaven*, [Fig 8] and finds Lewis' *'Mother and Child'* powerful. The criticism he makes of Grant's paintings reveals a yearning for a vigour that seems beyond the artist.

One always feels that there ought to be more body in his work, somehow. Even his best pictures here are rather thin.

This tone of kindly regret is very much the flavour of Brooke's account of the Etchells' work too. Brooke is disappointed, rather than displeased or outraged. Arguably this kind of tepid response should be regarded as typical when commentators are unenthusiastic but loath to denigrate and run the risk of being accused of personal or national disloyalty. However, a lukewarm appreciation like this would not secure anyone's reputation or command attention, especially when all the real and positive energy of this piece of criticism is expended on the French and Russian modernists.

The critical responses to this exhibition also demonstrated a further discursive feature. On November 9th, 1912 Roger Fry published '*An Apologia*' in *The Nation* and both its existence and content shed light on the critical ethos at this time which was actively positioning modern art.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

*However well-fitted to criticise the present exhibition at the Grafton Gallery I may consider myself, I can hardly suppose that my claim to do so would be accepted. This then, must be taken as a speech for the defence, not a judicial summing up. The prosecution has had time to develop its ideas with volume and vehemence.*⁴⁵

Political references follow and serve to situate the defence of post-

Impressionism at some distance from the more emotional and spiritual vein of his and Bell's aesthetic pre-occupations and theories. Referring to the attacks in the press he says,

*...but I doubt if it will do Matisse any more harm than the recent hurried canonisation of Gladstone has done to Mr. Lloyd George.*⁴⁶

Fry goes on to make the case that responses to the post-Impressionism in this exhibition had been critically unsophisticated. This illustrates Fry's concern at this stage to expect more from the fraternity of art critics and also reveals that he is prepared, unusually, to comment on this intellectual vacuum in the press.

*The exhibition provokes a number of very interesting and difficult questions in aesthetics, and yet no writer for the prosecution has taken the trouble to discuss them or to give reasons for his dislike. Almost without exception, they tacitly assume that the aim of art is imitative representation, yet none of them has tried to show any reason for such a curious proposition.*⁴⁷

Fry then delivers his legitimating argument for the new art that he knows is still necessary in a climate where this radical artistic development is habitually deemed to de-stabilise progress and continuity. Fry's forcefully worded defensive position takes a contrasting line to Bell's excitable rhetoric. The trope of progress is emphatic and the orderly advancement of art is his strong message to the readers of *The Nation*.

45 Fry, R. in *The Nation*, November, 9th, 1912 p 249

46 *ibid.* p.250

47 *ibid.* p.250

*But in its essentials it is in line with the older and longer and more universal tradition, with the art of all countries and periods that has used form for its expressive, not for its descriptive, qualities. So far from this being lawless and anarchic, it is revolutionary only in the vehemence of its return to the strict laws of design.*⁴⁸

Having begun by offering an authoritative and powerful overview of the critical reception of the preceding weeks, and also by implication the previous few years, Fry gives his full attention to an explanation of the value and importance of Picasso and Matisse. This is significant as it shows that when under intellectual pressure Fry abandons all but his strongest exemplars to make his aesthetic opinions carry full force. He makes no mention at all of any other artists in the exhibition and the only reference to the English work that might be construed is decidedly ambivalent and diplomatic.

*There is much work of immature or minor artists in the Grafton Gallery, work which has, I think, great promise for the future,...*⁴⁹

During these years Fry widened his activities and belief in new visual forms of expression which included the setting up of the Omega Workshops in 1913, and disseminating his ideas in further published essays and an extensive programme of public lectures. His interest at this time in domestic forms of modernism, as has been well-documented, derived from his own aspirations as an artist, his personal friendships and social networks. However his dedication to the impact and importance of French post-Impressionism meant that when he is at his most scholarly and serious his English associates are rarely used to strengthen his theoretical position. This is a form of disregard that home-produced modernists would not easily recover from in terms of critical acclaim and esteem. It is also possible to argue that a majority of Fry's fellow critics,

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.250

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.250

even those who sympathised with new ideas, were also influenced by this gathering consensus and did little more than identify the most talented exponents of English modernism, or politely find merit in some works of some artists, usually Lewis, occasionally Grant, as they plied their trade of reviewing exhibitions.

Frank Rutter, although somewhat eclipsed by Fry after 1910, and perhaps weakened as a force in the promotion of modern art by his withdrawal to Leeds for five years to reinvigorate the City of Leeds Art Gallery, maintained influence during these pre-War years through his weekly column in *The Sunday Times*, 'Round The Galleries'. In June 1913 he also organised an exhibition, 'Post-Impressionist Pictures and Drawings' in Leeds which importantly led to a commission to mount the 'Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition' at the Doré Galleries in October of the same year.⁵⁰ This event was characterised by a curatorial policy designed to expose a comprehensive assemblage of English and Scottish painters and to demonstrate links to, and progression from French modern artists and Italian Futurists. Of especial note is the fact that Bloomsbury post-Impressionists were excluded from this exhibition. Rutter's catalogue introduction and hanging decisions made strenuous efforts to cluster and account for the various strands of modernism he had brought together, and thus represented a further influential impetus towards the formation of an art-historical narrative that would guide reviewers and critics – and ultimately historians. In historiographic terms his knowledgeable catalogue essay can be regarded as a raw, as yet untested history of the immediate past. Rutter is clearly anxious to position schools, groups and movements with some analytical fixity, showing his commitment to the usefulness of drawing an early verbal map

⁵⁰ For a full account of these arrangements see, Gruetzner-Robins, A. 1997. p.117.

of the modern movements. The manner in which he problematises Cézanne's role as the '*Father of Post-Impressionism*'⁵¹ can be seen as a direct challenge to the Bloomsbury orthodoxy.

Critical responses to this exhibition illustrate the tone and attitude when English and Scottish modernists were in the company of continental radical art, but *not* in the company of Fry, Grant *et al.* The anonymous reviewer in *The Times* adopts a tone of mild disdain as to the coherence of the modern movement which has little intellectual power.

*Indeed, in England we call any modern picture Post-Impressionist which looks as if it would make a Royal Academician angry.*⁵²

The arch tone of this review makes much of the passing of time and the way this relates to the formation of taste – a facile but nonetheless notable awareness that is highly typical of those who wanted to distance themselves from any suggestion of hasty immersion in the present moment that would risk clouding their judgements.

... but many of them which would have provoked happy laughter three years ago now look quite ordinary. The public is inured to them as much as it is inured to Whistler or Degas...

The review, as was now to be expected, almost completely ignores the domestic modernists save for an appreciation of Lewis' '*Kermesse*', [Fig 9] which although barbed, once again reinforces a pre-eminent position that Lewis was securing in the historiography.

*But Mr. Wyndham Lewis's 'Kermesse' is an impressive design and looks as if it were an illustration to some new romance by Mr. Wells about some forms of life on another planet.*⁵³

51 Exhibition Catalogue reprinted in Bullen, J.B. 1988, pp 460-66

52 *The Times*, October 16th, 1913. p.12

53 *ibid.*

The exhibition review by Konody in *The Observer* nearly two weeks later takes a less jaundiced stance but its rhetoric heavily relies on emphasising the French lead in artistic developments. Having attempted to scandalise his readers with stories of Picasso's latest experiments in Paris, he then offers little succour to English modernists as he diminishes their efforts with the faintest of praise. He provides ample column space for his positive comments on Wyndham Lewis but ends with a stinging slur. This is an example of a widespread reviewing tendency to hedge favourable judgements with critical safeguards.

*The worst of it is that Mr. Lewis has narrowed his art down to a formula that threatens to become mechanical and is clearly incapable of further development.*⁵⁴

The review is pre-dominantly concerned to demonstrate the hegemony and achievement of the continental exhibitors, but also gives due attention to '*the young English revolutionaries*', however, their colourful lifestyles lead them to only become '*pseudo-Matisse and Picassos*'⁵⁵. It is only Spencer Gore who receives fulsome praise and respect, - and which atypically is reinforced by denigrating Delaunay.

The exclusion of the Bloomsbury post-Impressionists may partially explain Clive Bell's vitriolic review in *The Nation*, (25th October, 1913) but his devotion to the '*French masters*' is reiterated without reservation as he lambasts English Post-Impressionists for their shallow imitations. Only Lewis is (again) excluded from this withering attack on English '*mannerisms*'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *The Observer*, October 26th 1913, p10

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Richard Shone provides further background to Bell's generosity towards Lewis by citing a letter written by Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry on 16th October which also comments on the merit of '*Kermesse*'. Quoted in Shone, R. *Bloomsbury Portraits, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and their Circle*, London: Phaidon Press, 1976 and 1993 p.109.

Nearly a year later, from May 8th to June 20th 1914 the exhibition, '*Twentieth Century Art – a review of modern movements*' took place at The Whitechapel Gallery. This exhibition is significant because it claims to be a '*review*' of modern movements and as such was likely to prompt more historically-situated writing from the critics. It is worth noting that by 1914 a '*review*' was deemed possible and it can be assumed that the Whitechapel exhibition was claiming a certain comprehensiveness, also importantly, that the organisers were sure of that which was '*modern*' and that the '*movements*' were best regarded as multiple. Importantly also, many of the works exhibited had been exhibited previously. Indeed *The Morning Post* said,

*There are few new things in the show, but the old brought together in this way at the Whitechapel, somehow look different, they seemed to have got rid of much hocus-pocus.*⁵⁷

'*Somehow look different*' is an opaque phrase but it emphasises exactly how critical reception can be finely-tuned and nuanced to propose a juncture when a calmer and longer perspective became possible, and perhaps when judgements began to consolidate towards canonical fixities. One can speculate as to what '*hocus-pocus*' refers to; perhaps the rivalries and rows that Lewis and Fry had indulged in, or possibly a sense that the world had now got used to the new art and become less vexed and outraged. Another interpretation might be that this almost throwaway comment is an inward looking reflection on the trajectory of the criticism industry as it were, as it matures from initial defensive scattergun outbursts towards a realisation that there are trends and movements to be accounted for.

The art exhibited was wide-ranging and the hanging of work in categories, building on Rutter's precedent, emphasised notions of progression and

⁵⁷ *The Morning Post*, 11th May, 1914

manageable sub-divisions. It is known that there was no exhibition committee so the extent to which artists and their apologists negotiated the precise selection and arrangement of the art is somewhat opaque. However Richard Cork quotes from an article in the *Jewish Chronicle* which suggested that David Bomberg had organised the Jewish section of the exhibition. Cork also relates that Bomberg's trip to Paris the year before with Epstein had offered the opportunity to meet artists who would be represented⁵⁸. It is known that The Vorticist paintings were hung together in a commanding position downstairs. Upstairs were paintings of the Camden Town Group. This time Bloomsbury artists were included, self-confessedly influenced by Cézanne, and also those who had an allegiance to Augustus John's Slade School style of figurative post-Impressionism. The Jewish artists' work was exhibited in a small gallery under the stairs which, it has been established, arose from the mission of the Whitechapel gallery itself to serve the local Jewish community⁵⁹. Work from the Omega workshops, eighty-five items in all⁶⁰ that had recently been set up in 1913 by Roger Fry, was also on display. Some work by foreign artists was exhibited, notably sculpture by Modigliani⁶¹.

This exhibition was curated by Gilbert Ramsey, the gallery's director, together with the previous director Charles Aitken (but by 1914 at the Tate,) and perhaps less officially Roger Fry⁶². It captures a pivotal moment when an overview of English modern art inspired conscious evaluation. The critics were thus given an opportunity to make overall judgements and to lay down important critical

58 See Cork, R. *David Bomberg*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.p. 75.

59 See Tickner, L. *Modern Life and Modern Subjects, British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 2000, Appendix B pp218-9

60 Anscombe, I. *Omega and After*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1985, p.35

61 Mogdigliani's prominence can be explained to some degree by his relationship to Beatrice Hastings (Emily Alice Haigh)1879-1943, a writer , critic,- and his model, with whom he shared a flat in Paris..

62 Suggested by Judith Collins in '*The Omega Workshops*', London: Secker and Warburg,1993

benchmarks. It is noticeable that many of the published critiques of this exhibition do not dwell lengthily on individual pictures - in some cases not at all. Admittedly this may be because not much new work was on show but perhaps it can also be argued that a need was felt, and an opportunity offered to hesitantly start the quest to propose a grander narrative. In other words there is evidence in the critical responses of germinating narrative themes that would be more fully realised in the 'histories' of English modernism that were beginning to emerge.

Some broad context for 1914 is important to acknowledge in order to situate this exhibition which entered a complex cultural arena of activity, excitement and anticipation. The Great War was only weeks away so a sense of urgency fuelled public discourse generally and a sense of impending iconoclasm was to the fore. In the art sphere Marinetti and Nevinson had accelerated their attempted appropriation of what was called English Futurist art by issuing *Vital English Art*, - a challenging diatribe that was eventually published in full in *The Observer* on 7th June. Lewis published the first edition of *Blast* on 20th June to consolidate and enrich Vorticism, and to emphatically differentiate his group of modernists. Clive Bell's 'Art'- had been published in March 1914, a major treatise on the meaning and value of modern art and a fuller exposition of his concept of 'significant form'. Thus the conceptual apparatus available to the critics was active and highly charged as they assessed the Whitechapel 'review' and the battle lines with *un*-modern art were being drawn consciously and urgently. The belligerent headline in *The Times* captures this febrile moment.

ART AND REALITY. CHALLENGE OF WHITECHAPEL TO PICCADILLY⁶³

63 *The Times*, May 8th, 1914

'Piccadilly' clearly stands for The Royal Academy a reference which is explicit in the body of the article.

Something is happening there, (at Whitechapel) and nothing at all at Burlington House.

Snobbish spiteful views are suggested as being the Royal Academy's official view – a tactic that distances the writer from the art establishment.

The Piccadilly artists would say, no doubt, that Whitechapel is the proper place for it and Billingsgate the proper language.

This review attempts to corral and identify the art on show as a coherent whole.

The whole piece relies on the phrases 'new movement' and 'new movements' (always un-capitalised) as a way to propose commonality in the exhibition. The writer has an allegiance too, - 'nearly every young man of talent belongs to it.'

The writer also uses the language of rupture, - 'a new movement violently different, from anything in the last century.' The language gets stronger too.

Indeed, if one put all the best of the new movement in a phrase, one might say that it was an effort to make art no longer a parasite of reality.⁶⁴

The second section is stridently subtitled, 'A MISTAKE OF THE INTELLECT', which introduces an attempt to define and explain the oppositional visual radicalism of Lewis and Bomberg. In fact the writer says, despite this being a popular view it is NOT a mistake of the intellect; rather,

They may be trying to save their artistic souls by an inhuman asceticism, by a protest too merely negative against the slavery of art to fact; but at any rate their asceticism deserves respect.

The critique then moves to a very typical snipe at the lack of originality of many in the English scene, but this is swiftly countered by an appreciation of the work on show of Fry, Grant, Vanessa Bell, Spencer and Ethel Walker.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

At the 'movement' level in this extended piece the writer becomes concerned to specify the '*new movement*' or '*new movements*' and in the process proposes an interesting but ultimately short-lived bifurcation within the 'modern' category. Having described pictures by the artists mentioned above he introduces a new section, '*A RIVAL FORCE*'. This is on view in the upper gallery and comprises those who, '*derive more or less from Mr Sickert*'. He says that they '*are much more closely concerned with reality than the Post-Impressionists and the Cubists.*'

He goes on to say, '*It is the curiosity of Mr. Sickert himself that inspires them, rather than a desire to experiment in abstract design, and so they represent a rival force in art.*'

His final plea is that both 'schools' should unite. It has to be inferred that the writer regards post-Impressionists and Cubists downstairs as one school and the followers of Sickert upstairs as another. '*Without such a combination we believe that both movements will in the end be barren.*'⁶⁵

In *The Observer's* review of the exhibition published on May 17th it is clear that the writer feels even less need to comment on individual works as they have been seen before, but takes the opportunity to think more widely.

The completeness of the present exhibition, which gathers up the different threads in a manner in which they have never been gathered up before, lends itself to comment on the general trend of the varied endeavours.

The writer of this piece does not attempt to engage with the sub-heading, '*A review of Modern Movements*' but paraphrases with some sharpness.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

*They have practically excluded all works executed in the traditional manner and concentrated their attention to the new movements which are vaguely, known as Post-Impressionist art.*⁶⁶

His sour tone continues.

The title given to the show is almost equivalent to a declaration that, in the opinion of those who are responsible for the exhibition, there is at the present moment no vital art, no painting or sculpture worthy of being called 'art' that is not in some way connected with the new movement, the new aesthetic ideals.

However the invective softens after his salvo and he sees '*there is something to be said for both sides*'. He goes on to explain why change and revolution is important and necessary and endorses the exhibition's ability to represent the current scene and sees the overall link as '*the rejection of literal realism*'. The article then proceeds to summarise the nature of the four groups with little attempt to find further links. He is most negatively exercised by Bomberg, and Lewis. He finds the work of Bomberg as '*...having merely the appearance of linoleum patterns*'⁶⁷ [Figs 10,11]

What can be drawn from this review is an unexcited, non-committal attitude towards the work on display and no feeling that an explanation of its meaning is required. The schism with the Academy is acknowledged and regrettable, implying that a false or damaging dichotomy is opening up. The author kept his distance from ascribing value to the new work too. This acquiescence in the piece allows the exhibition's organisers to remain largely unchallenged in their delineation of modernism and its proffered taxonomical sub-structure. It is also possible to discern a level of discursive bitterness that the perceived rupture with past demands from traditionally-minded commentators. This indirectly generates more traction for those who happily identified that a revolutionary

⁶⁶ *The Observer*, May 17th 1914.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

new order was in the process of establishing itself and at the same time, very directly, also proves to those who resist change that progress has been dramatically halted.

The week before, also in *The Observer* a different response, again anonymous, was published and it contrasts strikingly with the account above. It was titled notably, and perhaps confusingly, '*Futurist Art In Whitechapel*' and is an extended parody of those who attended the exhibition, chiefly local visitors;

*...stout foreign mothers and dark, and sometimes ragged fathers*⁶⁸

The reader is told that visitors were reluctant to buy a penny catalogue and that this led to huge misunderstandings of the art on show. The tone of the whole article lacks any respect for the art, and also lacks respect for the viewers.

But it was after all the least intelligible pictures that made the most lasting impression. The East End families were for ever trying to make out what they meant. They came to the conclusion that 'The Dance' represented coloured patterns from a linen draper's shop and that the 'Acrobats' was merely a few accidental splashes.

*The large picture of 'The Hold' [Fig 11] fairly took them by storm. 'Here' one young fellow with artistic if rebellious instincts exclaimed, 'I'm going home to buy a penny box of paints and do some of these pictures myself, that's what I'm going to do.'*⁶⁹

It is a strong echo of the journalism that attended the 1910-11 '*Manet and The Post-Impressionists*' exhibition when ridicule was the critical norm. However in 1914 it signals an on-going tendency for critics to hide behind wit and parody as their judgements were not secure, despite four years of change and extensive public exposure to new art. In this review in *The Observer* there is no attempt to find a governing idea in the contemporary art being exhibited - a critical deficit

⁶⁸ *The Observer*, May 10th 1914

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

which is representative of a prevalent and light-weight reviewing style that avoids serious art historical positioning.

Walter Sickert writing in *The New Age* on May 28th begins his piece by commenting benignly and neutrally on the exhibition's literature. Sickert declines to take issue with the classifications and groupings described in the preface. *'It is perhaps as just as attempts to write history can well be'*, but he does modestly qualify the assertion that he and Lucien Pissarro were the most influential forces by proceeding to articulate his own debt to Spencer Gore who had recently died. He then moves to a more general critique of the exhibition which does very little to advance any serious analysis of the modern movement and largely becomes a vehicle to disparage in very few words, *'painters who have been misled by Mr. Roger Fry'* and the cubists, *'who have thrown up the sponge of Augustus John.'*⁷⁰ However, Sickert, clearly speaking unequivocally as a practising artist, returns to his questioning of the dubious trope of mapping the modern movement that was so endemic in exhibition practice and therefore the critic lexicon— again referencing the late Spencer Gore.

The historian of art may classify movements and register influences, but the essential factor, the factor of personal talent, escapes with laughter from all his nets.

More generally it can be inferred from this article a sense that even by 1914 modern art can is still airily reviewed, and rarely seriously probed. Sickert, relying on light-weight wit and a racy style, has found an acceptable way to avoid offering serious strategic insights into modern art and this tendency to sidestep any analysis as to the direction and development of English modernism speaks of a discourse that still relies heavily on un-probing

70 Sickert, W. in *The New Age*, May 28th, 1914

accessible journalism and which did not rise to the intellectual challenge of an exhibition explicitly presented as a landmark 'review'.

It has to be recorded that this exhibition also exhibited the usual and entrenched reception culture of facile recourse to comparisons with continental modernism, (unusually with Picasso in this instance), as a route into the disparagement of English artists' originality and skill. *The Westminster Gazette* of 21st May, 1914 said,

The English disciples of Picasso tread dutifully along the paths of his incomprehensibility without having deposited the guarantees of good faith which Picasso himself gave the world in his exquisite early drawings.

The rhetoric of stinging dismissal reaches a crescendo in comments on the Camden Town Group saying that the paintings are, '*...either Mr. Walter Sickert or Mr. Walter Sickert and water.*'⁷¹ This style of comment derived from a prevailing critical stance which asserted that only a very few artists at this time had real quality work to offer, and who were unfortunately hampered and bracketed with lesser talents.

The review then attacks William Roberts head-on;

*Mr. Roberts has managed to compress the development of a lifetime into six months. He is but an instance of the general insolvency which has followed an overdose of modernism.*⁷² [Fig 12]

The author of this piece was 'JMM' which is highly likely to have been John Middleton Murry. He goes on to make another astute and unusually objective point for the time which substantiates the notion that boundaries and categories were being heavily influenced by galleries and exhibitions and that this was done with the tacit acceptance of art critics.

⁷¹ JMM in *The Westminster Gazette*, 21st May, 1914

⁷² *ibid.*

Modern art is being monopolised and misformed by movements, to the extent that in the ordinary language of criticism all that is not in a movement or in the movement is not modern, and soon the individual artist who finds himself out of sympathy with the Academy, yet believes that the language of art is a common speech based upon the representation of reality, will be forced for his own life's sake to subscribe to a movement as to a trade union.

Murry puts great emphasis on how individualism is losing ground in the impetus towards collectivism. This raises questions about how artists in England were partly drawn to what Murry regards as regrettable schools and 'isms', and this tendency is also a reflection on society's relationship to avant-garde formations – that is, to what extent the avant-garde is complicit in the cultural field. This set of observations by Murry constitutes an unusual train of thought and demonstrates his ability to move beyond the axioms of the prevailing discourse. It is also an observation which corroborates the idea that powerful demarcations of new artistic tendencies were drawing a rather rigid map of English modernism.

The extant traces of the contemporary reception to English modern artists in newspapers and periodicals were also complemented by a small number of bolder and less ephemeral attempts to offer analysis of the new art movements in book form, and which were less directly prompted by exhibitions. Frank Rutter's '*Revolution in Art*' of 1910⁷³ is a daring pamphlet-sized book that shows commitment to, and passion for, French modernists. It sets out his stall as critic willing to vie with Roger Fry, whose original preference was for the essay mode, and who also continued to publish exhibition reviews in *The Athenaeum*, *The Burlington Magazine* and *The Nation*. Fry's is by far the

⁷³ Later supplemented by *Evolution in Art* in 1926 and discussed in the next chapter.

dominant corpus of writing celebrated and commented on extensively in histories of art criticism that cover this period. However, C. Lewis Hind's, '*The Post-Impressionists*'⁷⁴, published in 1911, is a primary source that has had less attention, but has an important founding position in the bibliography that addressed domestic shifts in art practice and is an important fixed point of attitudes and critical tropes being an extended account of the pre-War years that were being ushering into art history. Hind's book is still in fact an anthology of his published art criticism so its roots still have some of the register of the journalistic essay form, but this is nonetheless a hybrid genre of art –writing anthologised by publishers which recurs regularly through the next several decades. The permanence of the book form, and the seriousness of Hind's observations, inevitably registers differently from reviews and periodicals in the historiographical record. Hind's standing as a knowledgeable commentator had also been perpetuated the year before through the publication of his major study of Turner in which he gave special praise for the artist's more abstract Impressionist work and its ability to interpret modernity.⁷⁵

Hind's eleventh chapter in '*The Post-Impressionists*', boldly entitled '*The Movement in England: Augustus John*' is an unequivocal announcement of his nominee as the artist who leads the current innovations. French exponents are cited as sources of inspiration that he considers John is well able to incorporate creatively.

74 Hind C.Lewis, *The Post-Impressionists*: London: Methuen and Co. 1911.

75 Hind, C. Lewis, *Turner's Golden Visions*, London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1910. For further analysis see Smiles S. J.M.W. Turner, *The Making of A Modern Artist*: Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007 p.98

*Let me whisper something. John is the chief of the English representatives of the new movement in art. His artistic antennae have long drawn in the stimulation of the spirit that inspired the movement. He does not copy. In a flash he will suck the essence from a Cezanne landscape, from a Gauguin savage, inform the essence with his own personality, and lo! It is not imitation, it is new life.*⁷⁶

The chapter opens by considering Augustus John's one-man exhibition at the Chenil Gallery in December 1910, which was concurrent with Roger Fry's, *'Manet and The Post-Impressionists'* at the Grafton Galleries. The language is that of outrage and disappointment that the general public should be so mocking of Gauguin and Van Gogh.

*Why does the average person yawn before a work that he understands, and laugh before a work that he does not understand?*⁷⁷

However exasperation at this widespread Philistinism is surpassed by the weak efforts of one of his critic-colleagues who receives a vicious side-swipe for not appreciating John's *'Sketch During a Thunderstorm'* when reviewing the Chenil Gallery exhibition. The unnamed critic thought the painting, *'something of a joke'*. Hind says this critic is, "...pale, proud, cultured and anxious, and I suppose he has his own strange definition of 'a joke.'" Hind contrasts this with his own reaction to the work being, *'delighted and exhilarated by its decorative and romantic beauty and the originality of its vision.'*

The preamble which disparages the viewing public and then jibes at a fellow critic is therefore topped by the assertion of his own trustworthy taste and sensitivity. This is confidence-building mechanism for his readers so that they can also exercise critical dismissals of the judgements by other critics.

⁷⁶ Hind, C. Lewis , 1911,p.73

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.72

Hind swiftly moves on to consider the nature of post-Impressionism itself and thus provides a clear window into a type of analytical overview that was being articulated at this stage.

Three years ago he painted his, 'Smiling Woman', and if Post-Impressionism means simplicity, significance, synthesis, monumental design, clear eyes looking clearly through apparent realities to true realities, the his 'Smiling Woman' is Post-Impressionism or Expressionism.[fig 13]

This is a pithy convincing statement that has perhaps been occluded by the hard and widespread currency of Fry's analysis and theories and Rutter's enthusiastic activities as an impresario and critic. Hind then strengthens his point further by an allusion designed to give maximum authority to his belief in John, and this is coupled to an important observation about the general confusion that seemed to attend artistic expression in the pre-War years.

I do believe that there is something symbolistic of the age in the smile of John's 'Smiling Woman'. Her inward amusement is more robust than Mona Lisa's, but there is so much more to be ironical about in these days than in Leonardo's time. Is John's woman smiling at the efforts of modern mankind to find a way through the maze of modern art and other matters?
78

This metaphor of the maze is striking. It suggests most clearly the idea that everyone is lost, but in a contrived and rather genteel English way. The idea also includes the definite existence of an end, a resolution and result of progress that, although not in sight, is undoubtedly waiting to be arrived at.

Hind's written style is typical in that the mimicry of speech is the standard way to convey opinion. This colloquial register, echoed in most of the art criticism of the time, is deployed by some to enable accessibility for their readers and by others because the alternative, knowledgeable and scholarly analysis, is probably beyond their capability. Extended arguments are noticeably lacking

78 *ibid.* p.74

and quick-fire responses in speedily published exhibition reviews are the dominant discursive vehicles of writers charged with critiquing startling new developments in art. Not surprisingly their efforts are often tentative and hedged or conceived in haste with journalistic priorities uppermost.

There was also a habitual recourse to patriotically conceived disparagements of foreign art which raised the heat of the arguments, and critics readily disparaged each other to gain authority. It was also customary to contrast their own supposed wisdom and insight with that of an ignorant and confused general public. Also captured in this brief section of Hind's criticism is his attempt to define succinctly the underpinning principles of modern art. His theoretical point is carefully crafted, but not developed, nor used effectively to express the burden of his essay. It is clear though that intelligent critics such as Hind appreciated that an attempt in the direction of a conceptual explanation was required even in 1911, in a book that specifically aimed to make sense of modern art for the lay reader.

The book form, of course, stimulated book reviews providing evidence to assess how Hind's arguments were themselves critically received. This secondary evidence, in the case of Hind's book, led to a sharp but stinging retrograde review by Laurence Housman in *The Guardian*⁷⁹ which disdains to offer any response to the contemporary scene in England, rather, it chooses to develop a critique of post-Impressionists in general likening their efforts to immature children, children, (somewhat paradoxically) who have led dissolute lives too.

79 Laurence Housman in *The Guardian*, June 13th, 1911. p.5

*And, however right and eternal Post-Impressionism may be in principle, it is obvious that those who have revelled among the fleshpots cannot expect all at once to become equipped with wings of silver and feathers of gold. Modern Post-Impressionism is making very self-conscious efforts to enter the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child, but owing to its immediate antecedents some of its attempted toddling resemble more nearly the staggering of a drunken man.*⁸⁰

Housman's main argument is that post-Impressionism is not new and he cites the work of Giotto, Blake and Piero della Francesca to support his case. In this respect Housman joins those who identified such markers of visual continuity, Roger Fry being a notable example. However, the rhetoric of this book review is driven by disparagement and negativity rather the comforting message of progress through continuity. Of note, in terms of the tropes of art criticism at this point, is Housman's cynical view on the art market, which although scathing, is an original and astonishingly prescient thought on the worldly processes the new art was, and would become, subject to.

Now Post-Impressionism has been 'discovered' and our task must be to do to it as we have done to the continent of America – to make it the commercial wonder of the world.

Conclusion

Between 1910 and 1914 there was little evaluative language and few ideas available for coherently managing a sudden importation of modern art from the continent and assessing this alongside much more recent English attempts to break with the past; some of which were uniquely English visual responses to modernity. The response to this eruption of activity and interest was energetic,

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

even frenetic, as historians and theorists worked to continue building an appropriate fluency and conceptual apparatus to respond to modern art at the European level. However, the broadly –based efforts in this direction of Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Frank Rutter, amongst others, did not greatly benefit or enrich the bulk of writing that specifically addressed English painters; their work being typically handled with uncomplicated praise or simply-conceived negativity and this debate was partially hived off from the serious work of understanding modernism theoretically or within a pan-European context.

There was a strong, but often weakly argued, critical tendency that *did* involve comparisons and strong relativities, one which became closely reliant on the concept of Englishness itself and this in turn connected inevitably to ideas of national character and the nation's self-worth; usually in a cultural sense but also on occasions more broadly. This critical currency somewhat paradoxically, was deployed both to shore up the defence of English modern art and to attack its weakness. This latter critical dualism would become a recurring feature of the discourse in later decades too but which emerged tentatively in these early years.

The corpus of published critical reception material that appeared between 1910 and 1914 was largely inadequate to the immense task; talented commentators were scarce, the publishing industry lacked historical vision or commitment and the opinions that were formulated and offered were based on very little cultural substance. The few that did explore modern art with some enthusiasm were not able to mount a widespread display of coherent argument, being too given to overly subjective loyalties and a propensity to abandon their critiques of English art when the theoretical stakes were raised. Exhibitions of new art, mainly in

London, drove the raw debate through reviews and reactive, often lazy, journalism that did little more than offer simple descriptions of individual paintings. When underlying explanations were expounded through more measured attempts to theorise the onset and meaning of modern art these intellectual incursions typically veered decisively away from English painting to substantiate critical positions. This tactic also ensured the writer's professional reputation was not compromised by references to highly contested estimations of English modernism.

In terms of the narrative that this thesis sets out to trace over a forty year period this earliest section of the historiography is differently formulated to later chapters in that it has been concerned to gather representative concurrent responses to emerging modern art, and these cannot be evaluated as historical accounts. My methodology instead has rested on identifying trends and critical tropes which entered and then shaped the discourse, in an effort to assess how the upheaval in art practice was treated in terms of its critical reception. The analytical patterns and originating critiques I have identified within the primary sources will now be used as discursive benchmarks for my consideration of the subsequent decades, when immediate reactions gave way to measured retrospection and the first attempts to construct histories of this tumultuous period in English art. However, the overview that this chapter set out to achieve has suggested a provisional meta-historical perspective that goes beyond the identification of emerging tropical repetitions in the discourse. A paradigm amongst critics seems to have been taking shape in these early years – a paradigm that saw English modern art as incurably weak, blighted by cultural inhibitions and resistant to change. The paradigm had the capacity to become firmly fixed in the cultural landscape because it seemed to have been borne out

of English attributes that were paradoxically deeply valued. England seemingly had no desire to see itself as a revolutionary country with a thriving and threatening avant-garde and therefore, with some perversity took pride in the price that would be paid for this comfortable stability – a frail artistic response to the shocks of modernity. I will argue in the following sections that this paradigm, constructed by this discursive contradiction, can be shown to have had lasting historiographic effects.

Chapter 3

Now Becomes Yesterday

The 'SEVEN and FIVE' are grateful to the pioneers, but feel that there has been of late too much pioneering along too many lines in altogether too much of a hurry.... The object of the 'SEVEN AND FIVE' is merely to express what they feel in terms that shall be intelligible, and not to demonstrate a theory nor to attack a tradition.

This statement of intent in the Walker's Gallery exhibition catalogue, composed to formally explain and launch the mission of the Seven and Five Group on the occasion of its first exhibition in April 1920, succinctly holds within it evidence of an emerging consensus concerning the recent past. This chapter will be founded on an exploration of the oblique views and attitudes inherent in these retrospective assumptions that seven painters and five sculptors collectively announced in their effort to forge a new but safer trajectory for contemporary art. There is much to discern in these two sentences; the radicalism of the pre-war years seem to be accused of, and characterised by, rash, inchoate and chaotic activity, the supposed un-intelligibility of their art is to be regretted, and the implication made that radical modern art had assaulted and devalued tradition. This cultural environment of artistic conservatism and a return to figurative precepts can be held partly responsible for the way in which the pre-War modernists were regarded, or sometimes even ignored at a later juncture. Their activities did not seem relevant to a generation concerned to consolidate

and recuperate after the trauma of the Great War and whose taste for collectivism had become weakened¹.

This filter of disparagement, and a disassociating stance, together with a measure of cultural amnesia, as a new generation of artists sought to establish its post-War visual language and priorities, created a subdued and discrete discursive phase in the critical literature. The years 1918-1929 are characterised for the most part by critical apathy towards the early careers of pioneering modern artists, or a more assertive negativity as shown in the historical standpoint taken in the *Seven and Five* manifesto. There were still those commentators, like Frank Rutter, who re-iterated their long-held respect for the earlier endeavours but the output was sporadic and weary. Roger Fry retreated to a critical compromise, attaching greater importance to representation alongside formal values as the 1920s unfolded, and paid less attention to the domestic modern art scene after his 1920 publication '*Vision and Design*'. However, this narrative does have inherent contrasts within it which problematise these dominant reminiscences and accounts of the recent past; namely a noticeable tendency to isolate and praise individuals for their talent and achievement with the result that a canonising process is perpetuated during the twenties which ensured the lasting reputation of the leading painters, - Lewis, Grant and Sickert in particular. Further to this the critical literature of the nineteen twenties that concerned itself with the recent past articulated with institutional forces which inhibited fulsome celebrations of the pioneering

¹ The manifesto corroborates this, '*Each member is free to develop his own individuality*'. The manifesto is quoted in full in Harrison, C. *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. First published 1981, Second edition published 1994 with a new introduction. pp.164-5. Harrison includes this manifesto in full in his chapter 6 '*Hiatus 1919-1924*' which argues for the weakness of the period, calling this formation of SEVEN and FIVE part of a '*culture in recession*' and regarding the manifesto as a '*pathetic little document*' p165.

modernists. The role of The National Gallery, Millbank, (The Tate) and The Contemporary Art Society will be considered to substantiate this.

Before this summary view of the critical milieu of the 1920s is more fully addressed below an account is offered of the critical attitudes towards the pre-War years of experimentation as articulated during the War years themselves. These years reveal an overwhelming refracting effect of patriotism and a widespread need for reassuring messages about the role of British art. War art itself is outside the scope of this historiography and so it is important to be clear that the focus of the section below is to demonstrate how the artistic turmoil of the *pre*-War years is critically handled during the global conflict.

The Great War

Many modern artists took an active part in the Great War and some of them became official war artists. Others stayed behind and continued their activities and exhibitions of their work continued to be organised. Notably the chief Bloomsbury artists were conscientious objectors and their lives during the war were to a large extent defined by this. What is of most interest to this enquiry is to discern the extent to which criticism and writing on art at this pivotal period transferred ideas and positions into the war-time debate and early formulation of recent history. It will become apparent that beyond this watershed, when writers considered the pre-War modernists, they were in part influenced by the nature and estimations of war-time art exhibitions and sporadic pieces of art-writing produced at this time.

Perhaps the strongest theme that the extraordinary circumstances of the Great War prompted that can be traced in the art criticism was an imperative to consider the relationship between social turmoil and artistic progress. Tracking elements of this can be achieved by considering the responses to pre-war modern artists who were still exhibiting at this time.

An article by 'M.E.S.' in *The Manchester Guardian* in October 1914 illustrates that writing on art was often explicit and direct about world events. It is reasonable to conclude that M.E.S. is Michael Ernest Sadler as the article particularly addresses the work of Kandinsky, whose work was collected and avidly championed by him. Sadler at this time was vice-chancellor of the University of Leeds and a close associate of Frank Rutter. The article, '*Post-Impressionism and the War*' looks across European art widely. The opening paragraph vividly suggests that modern artists are regarded as suspicious because their activities are somehow conceptually similar to German aggression,

*There is a suspicion that violence in art and violence in diplomatic action are subterraneously connected. Germany has violated conventions and has behaved in an unbecoming and unusual way. Some of the painters of the new school have acted violently towards the established conventions of their art. Is there not a connection, we are asked, between states of mind so evidently the same?*²

Sadler immediately suggests that it is the inflammatory writings of Marinetti, the Italian futurist, which may have been the prompt for these views. The next stage in Sadler's argument is wryly structured. He suggests that perhaps modern art's detractors should remember that, '*the Kaiser has on several occasions shown his all-highest displeasure at the New Art.*' A long diatribe follows, supposedly in the words of a '*Junker*', in which Sadler is able to ironically attack crude anti-

² *The Times*, October 23rd, 1914. p.12

German feeling that is conflated with distaste for modern art. His peroration ranges across many of the moderns but, for the purposes of this project, interestingly culminates in how this imaginary 'junker' would regard the English scene.

*You English have had as much to do with Post-Impressionism as anybody except the Spaniards and the French. Your William Blake was a dangerous person. When that private in the Dragoons had him up for sedition the Chichester magistrates ought never to have let him go. And how about Augustus John and C. J. Holmes, and Henry Lamb? If the Kaiser saw their pictures he would be seriously displeased.*³

The ironic tone of the article at this point is intended to suggest that seeing dangerous subversion in modern art is an illogical deduction. Sadler's witty fantasy argues that if this point of view was valid the Kaiser would be in favour of the aggressive power of modern art. The reader is then asked to realise the falsity of the English tendency to be wary of radical painters.

The article then moves into a long middle section occasioned by Sadler's previous viewing of an un-named picture by Kandinsky in which he considers whether war was foretold. '*Perhaps.*' Sadler says, '*A high-strung artist has a brain like a sensitive plate. It records things before we, who have no second sight, know what is coming.*' Sadler then nuances his own argument when he expands into his final point.

No one would associate with the ghastly excitements of European war a picture of still life by Cézanne or one of Van Gogh's Arlesian landscapes, or Gauguin's, 'Agony in the Garden' or a dove-coloured geometrical design by Pablo Picasso, or a sketch of Craven contours by C.J. Holmes, or one of Augustus John's Welsh hillsides, or a portrait by Henry Lamb. Yet all these are, in their different ways, the outcome of that many-sided movement in European painting which has been labelled Post-Impressionism. Some of them date from twenty years back and more. In none of them can we hear what it would be literally true to call 'voices prophesying war' Nevertheless, the new movement in painting was a symptom of some great tension in the minds of men, felt sooner and more

³ *ibid.* p.12

*sharply by painters of genius than by ordinary people – a tension which has grown more severe until at last came a terrific explosion.*⁴

This is a wartime form of criticism that does not evade the very real problem of radical art being seen as dangerous. Sadler then considers the foresight of artists which he knows to be a fragile and highly subjective topic. Its value to a history of the reception of English modernism is the uninhibited way Sadler, counter to critical norms, brackets English artists with continental modernists with no suggestion that their sensitivities are lesser in any way, nor that their work as serious post-Impressionist artists should be ignored. What is also of interest is the use of '*tension*' to sum up the mood of those who, to Sadler, are mysteriously prescient artists. However Sadler's train of thought seems likely to be as much rooted in his own anxieties of the War-time as in the sensitivity of those who felt its imminence. It is this interplay of recent past and traumatic present that infuses and conflates in this kind of criticism – an awareness not explicitly registered by Sadler as he makes his argument.

As this chapter develops its commentary on the War years and beyond it will become clear that during this time a clear discursive reiteration of the chief tropes that underpinned pre-War critiques of modern art continued to consolidate. However, citing Sadler's article initially, I also wish to point at this stage towards a tropical theme which, although usually insubstantially argued, enters the discourse with some vigour. This new and growing critical tool is the idea that psychological explanations can add weight to the critical lexicon, thus offering writers extra complexity which can be offered to probe the deeper meanings which artists expressed and which their audiences could explore and perceive. It derives from a tradition that emphasises the 'otherness' of creative

⁴ *ibid.* p.12

artists who were regarded as having special sensitivities, but also draws from the recent strides in psychology and brain science that could be newly applied, albeit somewhat crudely at this stage, to radical art.

In a much more mainstream xenophobic strain, in March 1915 an un-named critic in *The Times* reviewed The London Group at the Goupil gallery. This is an article which demonstrates a negativity almost totally governed by a tribal need in wartime to identify traitorous behaviour. The article is called, '*Junkerism in Art*'⁵ – leaving little room for readers to overlook the rhetorical conflation about to be made by this critic. However this eye-catching headline does not go beyond a crude war-tinted critique of Lewis, Roberts and Wadsworth.

*Their pictures are not pictures so much as theories illustrated in paint. In fact, in our desire to relate them to something in the actual world, we can only call them Prussian in their spirit. These pictures seem to execute a kind of goose-step, where other artists are content to walk more or less naturally. Perhaps if the Junkers could be induced to take to art, instead of disturbing the peace of Europe, they would paint so and enjoy it.*⁶

The article continues with a gentler summary of the other artists' work, with no attempt to refer again to the '*Junkerism*' of the headline, despite the potential of Epstein's '*Rock Drill*' (1913-15) to provoke further thoughts on the conflict. This article demonstrates a very time-specific moment when allusions to the war seem to be expected and that it is the most innovative painters who are the main targets of critics who need, above all, to demonstrate their patriotism.

Five days later the same exhibition was reviewed by *The Manchester Guardian*, (signed 'J.B.') and is a useful critical comparator. The article's obligatory opening allusion to the War springs from a much more confident and

5. In German '*Junker*' means 'young lord' and denotes a member of the lesser nobility who typically became influential Prussian soldiers both during the German Empire of 1871-1918 and the Weimer republic of 1919-1933. Their reputation was characterised by reactionary, anti-liberal and protectionist beliefs and values.

6 *The Times*, March 10th 1915 p.8

positive sense that art is helping to healthily reflect the upheaval and is not part of some unpatriotic conspiracy. The reader is left with the idea that art and life are inextricably entwined.

In days of war the clash and clamour of Post-Impressionist colour and line seem natural to the times. When the whole world is disturbed and in arms, why should we expect art to show a calm or insipid face? And if many of the pictures, for all their show of force, do not seem to mean much, we have only to remember how little there is in the official communiqués which are the out-come of such multitudinous conflicts of forces.⁷

Like the review in *The Times* however, a position is taken which suggests that post-Impressionism is somehow appropriate to War-time because war is seen as the epitome of the disruption associated with modernity in terms of its mechanistic, transformative and cruel attributes. The idea that pre-war artists anticipated the international crisis is not considered. This prevalent rhetoric, so firmly tied to terrifying violence and disturbing political reality, would suggest that when peace comes the arguments will have to be significantly modified or revised. It will also be relevant to look for how this pattern of presaging and responding to war is repeated or re-conceived in the late 1930s. The next chapter will address this.

Many pieces of journalism during the War that covered more traditional art not surprisingly saw it as a soothing palliative, which can be usefully contrasted with the wariness towards the more radical modernists. The exhibitions of the International society in 1916 and 1917 were both reviewed in *The Times* in almost exactly the same tone. The work in 1916 was summarised 'Peacefulness in Art' and as, 'Optimism in Art' in 1917. This clearly speaks of a

⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, March 15th, 1915 p.6

parallel discourse that is understandably offering solace and comfort and is therefore welcoming of the art that provides this.⁸

During the War years there was also, a contrasting and strong tendency to publish articles on modern art of a more theoretical nature and they have an intellectual power and detachment that complements both the strident anti-German rhetoric and the hedged and tactful journalism cited above. An illustration of this form of specialist journalism is Clive Bell's article in *The Burlington Magazine* in July 1917 which is opinionated and assertive. His opening leaves no room for doubting his position that he will go on to elaborate in this long article entitled, '*Contemporary Art in England*'.

*Only last Summer, after going round the London Galleries, a foreign writer on art, whose name is as well-known in America as on the continent, remarked gloomily, and in private, of course, that he quite understood why British art was almost unknown outside Great Britain. The early work of Englishmen, he admitted, showed talent and charming sensibility often, but, somehow or other, said he, their gifts fail to mature. They will not become artists, they prefer to remain British painters. They are hopelessly provincial he said; and so they are.*⁹

This article, of over four thousand words, is argued in the most generalised terms and cites no individual artists until near its end. It is actually an attack on the cultural attitudes towards art and art education that had prevailed in England and which had produced, according to Bell, '*...no live tradition*'¹⁰

8 ' One would suppose from it, (the exhibition), that we were still enjoying a profound and frivolous peace. We do not therefore reproach it, for there is no more forlorn object than a war-picture conscientiously painted by a naturally peaceful artist,... The painters of the 'International' are out to soothe and amuse us rather than to arouse our patriotism'. *The Times*, May 4th, 1916

9 Clive Bell, 'Contemporary Art in England', in *The Burlington Magazine*, July 1917, p32

10 *ibid.* p.33

Perhaps inevitably for Bell he repeatedly compares England unfavourably to France. Having extolled the fact that French artists are, '*nourished by that great French tradition*' he turns to the lamentable scene in Britain.

*English painting however, has been left high and dry, and our younger men either imitate their teachers, too often second-rate drawing masters, enjoying at best a dull acquaintance with the Italian 15th and English 18th centuries, or, in revolt, set up for themselves as independent, hedgerow geniuses, ignorant, half-trained, and swollen by their prodigious conceit to such monsters as vastly astonish all those who can remember them as children.'*¹¹

Bell builds his argument towards offering explanations of this artistic deficit, mainly centred on notions of isolation, a too literary bias in the culture and its dangerous alliance with fashion and superficial pleasure. It has been shown in this research that the negative arguments concerning comparative artistic merit, exemplified and fully-worked here by Bell, began their journey as discursive mantras well before the War. It can now be asserted that the urge to differentiate English modern painting continued unabated and that the negativity increased in intensity, and was still drawn to sweeping prejudices against even the *potential* of England to produce first-rate art. Bell's denigration is unforgiving and deeply rooted in his clear belief that his argument must to be declaimed vehemently to have any effect. It can be provisionally averred that his unflinching strategy to undermine the possibility of artistic parity with France especially would gain further momentum, and that his most powerful weapon were his strikes at the sheer Englishness of domestic art – an accusation that had little defensive room in which to manoeuvre.¹²

¹¹ *ibid.* p33

¹² Interestingly, what is apparent from recent scholarship that has examined notions of national character and Englishness is that these same attributes were in most contexts widely and typically regarded as positive. Peter Mandler argues in 'The Consciousness of Modernity in Early Twentieth Century Britain, 1870-1940', (in Dauntton, M. and Rieger, B. (eds.), *Meanings of Modernity, Britain from The Late Victorian Era to World War 11*, Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001,

At this opening stage in Bell's essay the reader is still not aware of exactly what kind of art is being vilified. However, when his anger is largely spent he becomes more specific and this is where he tests his assertions on specific modern artists, although to some extent they are spared his full wrath, creating something of a critical contradiction or climb-down. Nevertheless the negativity is still maintained to some extent. Towards the end of the essay the reader is given some detailed commentary on The Camden Town Group, The Friday Club and The London group. He praises their '*talent*' and '*sincerity*'¹³ but berates their work immediately for '*its lack of receptivity, its too willing aloofness from foreign influence*'¹⁴ He then moves sharply to a long condemnation of English art criticism which he clearly sees as damaging and even poorer than the art.

*These are the men that might profit by good criticism, for they are intelligent and fair-minded. Alas! English criticism is more woefully out of it than painting even.*¹⁵

A few sentences later, as his argument reaches another crescendo, names are named and are only seen to have merit through their Parisian influence.

*Mr Grant, Mr Lewis and Mr Epstein, at any rate, have all seen the sun rise, (refers to Parisian art) and warmed themselves in its rays; it is particularly to be regretted, therefore, that Mr. Lewis should have lent his powers to the canalizing... of the new spirit in a little backwater, called English Vorticism, which already gives signs of becoming as insipid as any other puddle of provincialism. The danger is there always, and, unless our able young men make a grand struggle, they, too, will find themselves sucked into the backwater, impotent, insignificant, and prosperous.*¹⁶

p.119). that until the nineteen thirties '*...the English National character was widely felt to be an asset in dealing with modernising forces.*' It is therefore noteworthy that art writing, in this case Bell's, differs somewhat from the consensus position on the general national sense of worth and the cultural ability to wholly embrace and develop the artistic repercussions of modernity; this is a difference that could be more deeply explored outside the remit of this thesis.

13 Bell, C. 1917 p.36

14 *ibid.* p.36

15 *ibid.* p.36

16 *ibid.* p.37

Bell clearly has little un-qualified regard for any of the domestic modernists and his swaggering dismissal of their mediocrity had the potential to infiltrate the way histories of their work would begin to be constructed.

During the same month that Bell's work was published in July, Charles Ginner published an article, '*Modern Painting and Teaching*', in *Arts and Letters*. In contrast to Bell his outlook is measured and optimistic and he writes as an artist concerned to find a specific kind of Englishness in the development of modernism. This is a critical tendency which although less acidic and therefore less corrosive than Bell, also has the potential to work its way into the discursive environment. His reasonableness and authority as a leading practitioner offer an alternative view that commends the English interpreters of modernity. Ginner sees the war as giving energy to the promising work produced in the years immediately previous.

*Before the war the modern artistic movements were very much alive, and there is every reason to believe that afterwards it will be more so, as the violences of the present time will have excited minds and infused in them the spirit of action.*¹⁷

Ginner astutely identifies perhaps the most prevalent duality the English artists had to negotiate during these years and his mild neutrality on the matter speaks of a debate that was not *always* vitriolic or steeped in assumptions of inadequacy.

*I will not enter into the question of abstract painting as opposed to realistic painting. These two sides of art will continuously find themselves travelling side by side, always to their mutual annoyance. Realists of strong convictions, instead of venting their anger on this abstract Vorticist movement, would do better to see if it has in it anything of importance, and if so to what use it can be applied.*¹⁸

¹⁷ Ginner, C. '*Modern Painting and Teaching*', in *Arts and Letters*, July 1917, p.19

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.19

However, there is a demeaning tone in his evaluation of Vorticism which must be noted at this stage.

*Where I should quarrel with the Vorticists' art is in the limitation I see in their abstract patterns, which are liable to make one weary by their monotonous repetition.*¹⁹

In the end Ginner allocates the Vorticists and Cubists a role in displacing the previous generation but suggests in the last analysis these modernists have, '*driven into a blind alley*'.

The essay also makes an argument that the infrastructure of teaching in England is holding back talent. This resort to structural societal weakness as being responsible for weaknesses in art production is a critical refrain which many commentators deployed when vexed by English lack of achievement.

Roger Fry, a close associate of Clive Bell, also published an essay in the autumn of 1917 for *The Burlington Magazine*. Titled '*The New Movement in Art and Its Relation to Life*', it was the text of a lecture given to the Fabian Society Summer School. Fry raises the critical stakes through his unassailable grasp of the overarching issues surrounding the new art and its relationship to the history of art, but he also manages to convey this through an informal lecturing style. Accounting for the development of modern art, Fry's argument begins with a scholarly acknowledgement of early Christian art and then proceeds through to the twelfth century which he sees as a major turning point, and raises the notion that a long artistic trajectory is the intelligent way to view recent developments.

*...a reaction (in c. 1200) which destroyed the promising hopes of freedom of thought and manners which make the twelfth century appear as a foretaste of modern enlightenment.*²⁰

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.19

²⁰ Fry, R. '*The New Movement in Art and Its Relation to Life*', in *Burlington Magazine*, Autumn 1917, p.162

He moves with fluency to an overview of the Renaissance in which he discerns, *'a true correspondence between the change in life and the change in art.'*²¹

He finally arrives at the contemporary period, having built a rhetorical foundation for whatever points he would then wish to make. His final stage in the lecture considers the distance that has opened up between the modern artist and the viewer.

*In proportion as art becomes pure the number of people to whom it appeals gets less. It appeals only to the aesthetic sensibility and that in most men is comparatively weak by itself.*²²

Fry, despite the title of this lecture, does not name one modern artist, or one strand of the modern movement, in his serious attempt to explain and describe the, *'revolution in art'*. This art historical lecture chooses rather to point to the broadest sweeps of how art and life had articulated over centuries. Fry's audience is, I believe, asked to infer that the journey towards modern art was orderly and inevitable but punctuated by moments of radical change. To the modern reader his elitist views detract from his broad overview of art history but the tropical basis of his perspective in its adherence to ideas of traceable progress and coherent development are in evidence, a stance that Fry continued to articulate even as his passion for English modern art seemed to fade over the next decade.

I would also contend that this is another significant instance of how the practice of the analysis of artists' work was capable of being critically isolated from most theories relating to their cultural presence and development.

21 *ibid.* p.162

22 *ibid.* p.168

Fry's final words are resonant too. '*...it is curious to note how more conscious we are of the change in art than we are in the general change in thought and feeling.*'²³

This perception, of course, comes from a man whose chief preoccupations were the production and analysis of art but nevertheless it is an assertion which provides a testing reference point for the quality of the art writing more generally.

As a complement to the publication of this important lecture in Autumn 1917 the critical reception of Fry's one-man show at the Carfax gallery in December 1917 can be noted.

*There is an exhibition of flower-pieces at the Carfax gallery in Bury-street, by Mr. Roger Fry, which will surprise those who think of him as a wild revolutionary in painting. The fact is that he is much more revolutionary in theory than in his instinctive practice. He reminds one of a Jacobin preaching the most extreme politics, but in his own domestic politics, a respectable father of a family.*²⁴

The unsigned review is entitled, '*Mr Fry's Practice and Theory*' which at once offers an opportunity for the writer to comment on the disparity between original thinking on modern art and the timidity of modern art practice. Clearly the disproportion is particularly evident to the reviewer in Fry's case, but the article has a resonance that goes beyond this example. The implication is that theorising about modern art has taken debate forward but that practitioners in England do not deliver its realisation in painting. The fact that Fry himself embodies this discrepancy adds especial force to this perception of cultural dislocation.

²³ *ibid.* p168

²⁴ *The Times*, December 4th, 1917. p.5

Frank Rutter demonstrated in an article the following Summer in *Arts and Letters*, a related discursive tendency – the inclination to theorise modern art with very little desire to illustrate its characteristics by citing domestic modernists. Giving weight and authority to an argument about the step-change in art seemed only to require polite cursory passing comments on English art, despite Rutter's huge enthusiasm for English modernists expressed in much of his journalism and writing elsewhere. In this article it is only Whistler who is mentioned by name as Rutter attempts to position the real 'iconoclasts': *Picasso, Kandinsky and Balla*.²⁵ It is this tendency for writers, when at their most analytical and serious to abandon their intimately-understood compatriots and this undoubtedly exacerbated the struggle English modernists faced in their attempts to succeed at the supra-national level.

The art writing and journalism of the War years I have argued was strongly moulded by the political circumstances, also allowing a full rein to those such as Fry and Bell whose pacifist position in the War gave them the opportunity to build a critical momentum. This enabled their views on the autonomy of aesthetic emotion to become more developed and dominant while in parallel more careful writers nuanced their exhibition views to take account of the patriotic imperative they felt moved or obligated to shore up.

²⁵ Rutter, F. *Arts and Letters*, July 1918 p.136 . Given the War-time context the artists cited were perhaps significantly not German.

Post-War

The critical environment in the immediate post-War years, for the purposes of this research, acknowledges, but cannot fully examine, a background of a return to more traditional forms of representation in art practice but one which works in a complex articulation with the writing that documented the pre-War experiments in avant-garde art. It is not the objective of this research to enquire into the causes of the shift away from forms of abstraction that occurred, involving both young artists and the pre-War modernists.

It will become clear as these post-War years of the historiography are explored that the pre-war years are corralled and diminished by art writers in a manner that can be seen as both reflecting diverse and retrenching art practice *and* the concomitant patronage and approval of more conservative public taste, - both involved in some kind of opaque and complex symbiosis.

In addition to this prevailing critical ethos the first wave of post-War historians of the pre-War period constructed their story of oppositional art in the clear knowledge that; firstly its strident efforts had not been sustained in England, nor, more crucially, in mainland Europe, and secondly, that writing histories of radical art within a conservative context will require a measure of fictive handling so that the pre-War radicalism can be characterised as either an unrealised opportunity or an embarrassing false start . It is to be expected that this discursive pressure will initially subvert or prevent any narrative that would wish to unconditionally celebrate early modernism. This negative drift can undoubtedly be discerned in the Post-War 'histories' of the nineteen twenties but there is also, acting in tandem, a more understandable fading process that

began to operate such that pre-War modern art was decreasingly featured with any critical gusto.

Despite this waning process, what I hope to demonstrate convincingly is that a relatively small number of commentators established a critical agenda during the nineteen twenties which voiced a level of support and appreciation when individual artists were being evaluated but that a louder, coarser-grained discourse was also in operation to disparage and dismiss the artists' collective efforts to vie with continental modernists and which relied on the already established critical tropes. Thus when the debate is held at the 'movement' level; Vorticism, Camden Town, post-Impressionists and so on, the art writers tend to consolidate an unrevised and shrinking narrative that shows only minimal respect or regard, but when the achievements of individuals are being described in detail there are strong messages of achievement - often laced with personal loyalties. This inconsistency, I would contend, is reflected in the internal mechanisms of domestic historiography especially when commentators on the one hand are frequently writing about friends and close colleagues whom they genuinely value, but on the other hand are trying to build or consolidate their credentials as objective historians. It would seem less controversial to find individuals who can be favoured and valued than to take professional risks as a historian by extrapolating these nominated individuals into broad arguments of merit at the art movement level.

During the nineteen twenties The National Gallery, Millbank, (often referred to as 'The Tate' at this time) and The Contemporary Art Society were both institutions which influenced, and to a certain degree under-pinned the written critical discourse about pre-War modern art. The Tate's record of these years

bears witness to a conservative phase in terms of acquisitions that reflected the tastes of the chief decision-makers at this time: Charles Aitken as Keeper, J.B. Manson as assistant Keeper and H.S.Ede as Assistant. The Tate had been closed 1917-20 and when it re-opened there was a great emphasis on enriching the modern French collection, chiefly through the Courtauld Fund set up in 1923, and the controversial bequest from Hugh Lane.²⁶ In 1927 a celebratory account of the previous ten years of the Tate was published, which tells a story of inadequate resources and a demanding pre-occupation with re-construction, but which acknowledges the beneficial role of the Contemporary Art Society. The paintings singled out as of special value from this source speak clearly to the conservatism of the time.

The CAS, founded in 1910 for the special purpose of securing works by young artists of promise at reasonable rates, has also been a most valuable benefactor to the Gallery, presenting Augustus John's 'Smiling Woman' in 1917, Sickert's 'Ennui' in 1924,²⁷ [Figs 13,14]

The Contemporary Art Society itself played a similarly ambivalent role with regard to championing the pioneers of domestic modern art; the breadth and eclecticism of its purchases inhibiting any strong resurgence of support or interest. However, Ede's involvement from his position in The Tate was enthusiastic and the sources detailed in the 1927 acquisition list of modern art testifies to the CAS's predominance as a donating body of domestic modern art, far outnumbering any other during these years. Roger Fry's involvement in the

26 Despite this emphasis it was not until 1933 that Cézanne joined the collection as part of the bequest of C. Frank Stoop.

27 *National Gallery, Millbank – A Record of Ten Years 1917-1927*, p16. This summary is supplemented by an appended complete acquisition list which clearly shows only a limited commitment to English modernists focussing on one or two paintings each of Vanessa Bell, Bomberg, Gertler, Ginner, Gore, Lamb, Nevinson and Grant. In contrast 12 works by Augustus John were acquired, and six by Sickert. It is perhaps highly notable that not one painting by Lewis was acquired during these ten years.

society was also significant but tensions grew and he threatened resignation in 1923.²⁸ The committee successfully persuaded him to remain involved and in 1924 it fell to him to be the nominated buyer for that year. His choices were mixed, but significantly included a painting by Vanessa Bell. Thereafter Fry's energy was largely confined to the CAS sub-committee on foreign art – which corroborates the general retreat during this decade that Fry made from his earlier efforts to promote domestic modern artists.

In 1919, a lavish but brief monograph had been published to commemorate Harold Gilman which begins to hint at some of the emerging discursive patterns of the post-War period.

'Harold Gilman an Appreciation' has many illustrations and two short essays which are inevitably laudatory. However their undertones and assumptions are revealing. Louis F. Fergusson, a friend and patron, provided a highly personal account of Gilman's life, but he also set out to tackle the ideas behind the catalogue preface to a joint exhibition with Ginner held at the Goupil Gallery in the Spring of 1914, written by Ginner and later published in *The New Age*. Writing in 1919 Fergusson has a relaxed, cavalier regard for the coining of a new term five years previously. 'Neo-Realism' devised by Ginner to denote his and Gilman's work has by 1919 become seen as '...a mere jargonal counterblast to the not especially felicitous term Post-Impressionist'²⁹ thus offering a small challenge to the hold which groups and 'isms' continued to exert on critics' analytical apparatus.

28 See minutes of CAS meeting 14th march 1923, 'Fry stated that his presence as a member of CAS had proved only a waste of time and could lead to no useful end' He said that he has been for nearly 10 years in a minority of one and that he realized given the present situation it was inevitable that his opinion could have very little effect.' TGA Contemporary Art Society, 9215. 2.2.1.

29 Lewis, W. and Fergusson, L. *Harold Gilman an Appreciation*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1919, p23

What interests Fergusson most however is a new perspective on innovative art that is now available to theorists and which will afford new insights, this being the new analytical psychology of Freud and Jung. Fergusson brings the typical critical supremacy of Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh into a different relationship to Post-Impressionism and Neo-Realism using this psycho-analytic lens and demonstrates further moves towards a new critical sub-narrative in the making already noted in some War-time writing.

The one thing common to the Neo-Realist and the Post-Impressionist is as intense admiration for Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh – artists, all three, who were much given to unconscious fantasizing, and afford an extraordinarily rich scope for psychoanalytic investigation. In the two cases the admiration follows very different lines. Most of the Post-Impressionists strive to frame formulae and canons out of the work of their three dead leaders. ... The neo-Realist, on the other hand, is inspired by their intense enthusiasm for art and their splendid struggle to express themselves, but makes no deliberate attempt to see with their eyes or to adopt their technical deficiencies.³⁰

This quotation also speaks of a weak strand in the positioning of early English modernism that refuses to defer wholly to French dominance and which seeks to establish nationally-specific merit in work that has yet to find any significant international reputation.

The second essay in this commemorative book is by Wyndham Lewis. The tone is neutral rather than affectionate, as perhaps could be expected, and a key paragraph swerves round any obligation to roundly praise, with the result that he gives a message that Gilman was competent but ultimately derivative.

If you mix the Signac palette; Van Gogh's strips and Sickert's spots; Charles Ginner's careful formularisation of modern buildings, all their bricks painted in; a little Vuillard and a little Vlaminck; you get the material of his talent.³¹

30 *ibid.* p.24

31 *ibid.* p.14

Charles Marriott's book '*Modern Movements in Painting*' of 1920, as the title suggests, aims to take an overview of the various manifestations of modernism but it also devotes the second half of the book to brief biographical details of the chief exponents accompanied by reproductions of their works. This book has a structure which, typically during this decade, allocates no more than one chapter to Post-Impressionism in England, and another in this case to '*Mr. Brangwyn, Mr. Sickert, Mr. Steer, Mr. John*'. The majority of the other chapters deal with French modernism. Despite this standard way to balance and describe the inception of English modernism, and its debt and relationship to continental modernism, Marriott has some tentative fresh ideas that enter the post-War estimation for recent history which deserve some attention.

Marriott's introduction demonstrates an awareness of the highly embedded trope which assumes history's linear development through time but he opens his argument by briefly questioning the relationship of art to '*the general stream of human progress ... from Altamira caves down to the present day.*'³² His enquiry is answered in his swift assertion that,

*Both human life and the art of painting are continuous and traditional; they do not make a clean break with the past at any point.*³³

Thus the reader is assured of the wisdom and correctness in looking for cause and effect in art movements; an assurance which is perhaps susceptible to a charge of teleologically-conceived analysis as Marriott seeks to identify an orderly trajectory of development. However, following references to this orthodoxy Marriott somewhat unexpectedly says that he has perceived an abandonment of the normal mode of progression in recent times. He posits that

32 Marriott, C. *Modern Movements in Painting*, London: Chapman and Hall Ltd. 1920 p.1

33 *ibid.* p.1

the weakness in modern movements has arisen because change has become deliberate and conscious; de-coupled from the true impetus of that change and not necessitated by the imperative of better techniques.

*...the conscious and immediate introduction of changes in practice which in the past proceeded automatically and slowly from the facts; in other words, the tendency to make deliberate aims of what should be regarded as consequences.*³⁴

Marriott's essay extends this nuanced interpretation of the linearity of history by stating his firm belief that artists have craft skills which they simply use to respond in a straightforward way to historical circumstances, and this represents a further, and radical, incision into the strong myth that builds its rhetoric on the other-worldly creative powers of artists. He debunks the idea that artists are fundamentally different to others. This can be seen as a significant shift from the special sensitivities assigned to artists in more romantically constructed art writing and one which marks out his writing.

Marriott also situates the emergence of modernism in England in the designated chapter with some originality saying it arose within an environment 'of so many forms of Protestantism' but, after rather superficially sketching this broad contextual argument defaults to the standard notion that responses were taken 'ready-made from France'. He concludes that, '*The consequence is that a great deal of English Post-Impressionism had to be dismissed as mere imitation.*'

However, Marriott has exceptions to offer and his comments on Cubism continue to have a certain independence of mind.

³⁴ *ibid.* p.9

*...the effect of Cubism upon an extremely logical sense of form in France has resulted in a deadly progression of still-life pictures. Over here, where the sense of form is deficient, Cubism has had rather a bracing effect.*³⁵

He also praises Peploe, J.D. Fergusson and Estelle Rice. Marriott's strongest appreciation however is bestowed on Vorticism and his comment that it is 'a *genuinely native movement*' can be noted as an early post-War example of a fast-evolving critical narrative that placed Vorticism as the only modernist contender at the European level. Marriott, despite his support, presents a critique of Vorticism also that absorbs new ideas. A psychological basis for explaining modern art has already in general been noted in Louis Fergusson's essay on Gilman the year before and referred to previously, here Marriott makes a case that Vorticism is not best suited to the medium of paint. He says, *'it is significant that the most satisfactory Vorticist designs are in drawing, woodcut or water-colour'*³⁶ He says this is because they are *'mediums which lend themselves naturally to treatment in straight lines and angular patterns'*. Marriott then turns to experimental psychology to substantiate his point and even supplies a footnote to lead the reader to the expert source of his opinion. His proposal drawing on this source is that,

*Recent careful experiments by trained psychologists on subjects taken, apparently, at random, with the simplest elements of form, have demonstrated that, contrary to general belief, straight lines are more popular than curves.*³⁷

Marriott's bold assertion is then made that, *"... a design by Mr. Wyndham Lewis should have a wider appeal than a design based upon Hogarth's, 'line of beauty and grace.'"*³⁸

35 *ibid.* pp.153-155

36 *ibid.* p.161

37 *ibid.* p.161

38 *ibid.* p.162

Marriott concludes his chapter on the post-Impressionist movement in England by elaborating the case that oil paint is an unsuitable '*artistic material*' for Vorticism and concludes by lending his support to Lewis' own view on the future of Vorticism that, '*a great deal of effort will automatically flow back into more natural forms from the barriers of the Abstract.*' This is significant in that it is, by 1920, appropriate to regard pre-War experiments as a high, or low, watermark and that moderation will ensue. As has been suggested above this is a comment that must be seen as nuanced by contemporary shifts in practice.

This assessment of early modernism in Marriott's book has an inchoateness making it raw and exploratory but nevertheless there are threads of analysis and evaluation which can be discerned. Despite its accessible style and structure, this publication demonstrates a complex manifestation of the historian's craft and thus exemplifies the mechanisms of historiography at the moment when the retrospective process is dealing with very fresh and recent material. Marriott's historical consciousness is only just beginning to form about the period he is writing about and so the objects of his selectivity are not informed by what Hayden White calls, '*... a secured knowledge of reality*'³⁹ However, the unavoidable process of selectivity and rejection still guides his hand and the facts he seemingly rationally works with, are shaped into the raw materials of a quasi-fictionalised story. Hayden White theorises this transformational process in his essay '*Historical Text as Literary Artifact*' which he realises is not comfortable for some historians to contemplate, however, I suggest this trope has a pertinence to the research in hand because as the historians who follow Marriott and continue honing their narrative of the

39 White, H. *Tropics of Discourse, Essays in Cultural Criticisms*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 81

emergence of early modernism in England they are strongly given to the myth-making tendencies the writing of condensed histories exhibit, and by definition these are highly dependent on dominant critical tropes. This is not to say their work grossly misrepresents or falsifies, but rather that this five-year period, 1910-15, is a particularly discrete phase that allows its reality to be folded into a critical environment in the twenties that largely only required uncontested story-lines based on the tropically moulded witness accounts of the art criticism already in place.

1920 was also the year when Roger Fry published *'Vision and Design'* – a collection of essays previously published in various papers and journals, many belonging to the pre-War and War-time years, including the preface to the second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912. It is the final essay *'Retrospect'* that Fry included in this collection, written in 1920, that requires some comment, chiefly for its lack of detailed attention to domestic modernists. It is a reflective piece of writing in which Fry assesses his quest to find and describe his aesthetic position theoretically. He also admits to critical weaknesses; *'I do not think I ever praised Mr. Wilson Steer or Mr. Walter Sickert as much as they deserved.'*⁴⁰ He recounts his late discovery of Cézanne and the furore surrounding the 1910-11 post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries which the general public and many critics had deplored. What is of interest to this research perspective is that this reminiscence has only the barest comment to make on the English modernists he had been so keen to support before the War.

In contrast to its effect on the cultured public the Post-Impressionist exhibition aroused a keen interest among a few of the younger English

40 Fry, R. *Vision and Design*, 1920, London: Pelican Books, p.226

*artists and their friends. With them I began to discuss the problems of aesthetic that the contemplation of these works forced upon us.*⁴¹

Fry quickly returns to his own aesthetic sensibility and several times draws on the way his ideas, and those of Clive Bell, had developed to expound the notion of aesthetic emotion. Quite clearly it can be seen that Fry is most absorbed by his intellectual journey, and the powerful formative influence on this made principally by Cézanne. His explicit retrospective and eponymous focus in this essay does not feel the need to acknowledge any English art. This omission exemplifies the tendency in the critical discourse of the time to bypass English art when serious theoretical ideas are being considered. In reviews Fry often returns to his views on English modernists when the immediacy of an exhibition presents itself. When the over-riding mission to secure his theoretical credentials is to the fore his compatriots are not central to his arguments.

'*Vision and Design*', can be regarded in historiographical terms as part of a publishing genre that recurs intermittently throughout the twenties and thirties adopted by others such as Bell, (1922) MacColl, (1940) Read, (1933) and Pevsner, (1956). It can be argued that the inevitable eclecticism of these publications occupies a critical space that might otherwise be filled by fresh and arguably more extended coherent thinking. These re-printed anthologies drawing from periodicals and newspapers and texts of lectures offer polished essays but do not permit a longer and more extensive argument to develop. However, Roger Fry's clear critical success with *Vision and Design* leads him to

41 *ibid.* p.228

mention in a letter to Virginia Woolf ⁴²only two years after that a further volume could be launched, a project that was never realised.

In 1922 a different and complementary critical register of Fry's is in evidence when he reviewed an exhibition of Vanessa Bell's work at the Independent Gallery. The review in *The New Statesman* has evaluative and retrospective elements that are pertinent. The tone is appreciative and his comments imply that he is incorporating his estimation of her pre-War work too. His analysis operates on a level that conveys her value as developing colourist, but not an artist with any raw originality and the reader is left with the feeling that her work is being consigned to a category of worthy domestic talent and little more. Fry makes no attempt to compare to her work to anyone outside England.

*... it is as a colourist that Vanessa Bell stands out so markedly amongst contemporary artists. Indeed, I cannot think of any living English artist that is her equal in this respect.*⁴³

Once again it is possible to discern the habitual critical position that, when in a benign mode, shields English artists from their continental equivalents.

The highly personal way he phrases his comments further emphasises this approach in Fry's review because a reader unaware of his personal relationship with Vanessa Bell would not be able to comprehend his effusive stance fully. Aesthetic emotion in this review can be interpreted as clouded by personal emotion – an ironic undertone given Fry's avowed belief in pure, unencumbered aesthetic responses.

42 Letter to Virginia Woolf May 18th, 1922 reprinted in Sutton, D. (Ed.) *Letters of Roger Fry, Volume Two*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972 no 519 p525

Previously, in a letter from Virginia Woolf to Roger Fry, (21st December ,1920), she mentions '*Vision and Design*'. Nigel Nicolson, in a footnote to this letter reproduced in her collected letters Volume Two, that in return for a favour, (addressing envelopes), Virginia had been given a copy of Fry's '*Vision and Design*' see, Nicolson, N. *The Question of Things Happening; The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II 1912-1922*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1976, p450.

43 Fry, R. in *The New Statesman*, 3rd June 1922

*The very absence of any anxiety about the effectiveness of what she does produces a refreshing sense of security and repose*⁴⁴

The mild negativity in Fry's estimation of Bell concerns the formal properties in her work.

*I do not think she makes any great, or new discoveries in design....But adequate as the design is, it seems to me that in this direction her development is not yet complete.*⁴⁵

However Fry notes that,

*Among her early works I remember one or two that suggested a peculiarly personal feeling for the architectural opposition of large rectangular masses and bare spaces. There was gravity and impressiveness in these which I miss in her present work.*⁴⁶

This is not the language of one who still has a strong sense of Vanessa Bell's pre-War ability to be innovative and still capable of realising her potential to become part of any move to overturn the artistic status quo.⁴⁷ It is possible to speculate as to the paintings Fry seems to be recalling; perhaps her experiments in abstraction before the War, or perhaps the barrenness of 'Studland Beach' (c. 1912). [Fig 15] What remains the case though is the glimmer of a critical position, here expressed by Bell's close ally, that artistic expression from the period before the War is not being learned from, and a retrenchment is beginning to become evident. The strength of citing this particular review is that it does not set out to contribute consciously to a position statement on English art and yet the message which detracts from Vanessa

44 *ibid.*

45 *ibid.*

46 *ibid.*

47 Fry's views seem to have changed since his comment in a private letter (April 6th, 1919) to Vanessa Bell when he appears to find little value in her more abstract experiments. 'The only picture that has gone thin on my hands is that big abstract business which I have in my studio and which doesn't mean anything to me now.'

Quoted in Sutton D. *Letters of Roger Fry Volume Two*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1972 no.450, p.449

Bell's recent work, and also names Grant as an artistic influence, contributes to a new narrative strand of fading achievement, despite Fry's polite loyalties to a close friend.

It may well be that her instinctive bias in design will again assert itself now that she has gained the control of her means of expression. I suspect that it is in this question of design rather than elsewhere that the influence of Duncan's Grant's more playful and flexible spirit shows itself.⁴⁸

It is important to note that during the early years of the decade the critical styles and stances of Roger Fry and Clive Bell diverged; Fry being anxious at a personal level to distance himself from the loud journalistic rhetoric Bell continued to broadcast. In a letter to the French cubist, Jean Marchand, Fry is forthright about their differences.

Certainly he can be very annoying. I think his criticisms have done me more harm than all the others. ...He hasn't much judgment and he is a terrible snob, so he lets himself go impetuously in the direction his snobbism suggests.... What one could precisely reproach Clive Bell with is that he has not this solicitude for art, that he does not make a serious effort to understand it but collects hearsay and remarks from other artists etc. he has no rudder; he simply floats in the currents of avant-garde opinion, and unfortunately he is not negligible; he writes with such assurance that the world of snobs listens to him eagerly.⁴⁹

Frank Rutter's first significant book since the hastily published '*Revolution in Art*' (1910) is marked by its domestic focus. '*Some Contemporary Artists*' of 1922 is a thoughtful work and marks his developing ambition to move beyond the ephemeral nature of journal and newspaper writing. The book is an important insight into how radical art dating from before the War is being collapsed into a historical narrative, coming as it does from a committed and serious supporter

⁴⁸ *The New Statesman*, 3rd June, 1922.
⁴⁹ Sutton, D, 1972, no 512. p.519-20

of modern art. Rutter's work throughout the next fifteen years, until his death, is also an invaluable counter to the hegemony of Fry's views and operations, and this book institutes the post-War interplay of their respective critical stances.

The most striking initial feature of '*Some Contemporary Artists*' is the complete exclusion of Bloomsbury artists, other than the peripheral Henry Lamb. The book's structure is unadventurous. Following an overview introduction he simply devotes a separate chapter to each artist he wishes to include in his tentative canon. At once it can be asserted that a fully-fledged historical perspective is not yet clear to Rutter and so this book marks only an embryonic attempt to shape a hall of lasting fame. Indeed his short overview introduction is concerned to acknowledge this problem saying that, '*the verdict is given by time, and time alone.*'⁵⁰

It is the opening paragraph that is perhaps the most disconcerting, in terms of establishing credentials for a new publication. The positive and the negative messages of the opening sentence set up a tension that will have to be resolved.

*It is no longer the fashion to abuse British pictures.*⁵¹

Rutter is clearly worried as to how a book with contemporary and retrospective analysis of English art will be discursively coherent. He has recently over-heard patriotic post-War rhetoric.

*'British art stands second to none in the World'. So said Sir Robert Witt at the opening of a Spring exhibition in Whitechapel this year (1922).*⁵²

50 Rutter, F. *Some Contemporary Artists*, London: Parsons, 1922, p.12

51 *ibid.* p.11

52 *ibid.* p.11

Rutter knows this is an untenable position to hold and uses this to reflect and comment in the familiar way on French supremacy, the negative effect of The Royal Academy and the worthy efforts of the New English Art Club. It is of interest that Rutter gives immense emphasis to the role of art critics as being the perpetrators of change, prominently naming D.S.MacColl, C.J.Holmes, Walter Sickert, and Roger Fry. Rutter's optimism gathers pace as he lauds the new post-War talent but his glance back to before the War reveals a surprising denial of worth.

*Whereas the pre-war painters dallied with nineteenth century ideas about the supreme importance of execution, the post-war painters are inclined to let execution 'go hang' and to concentrate their energies on conception.*⁵³

This is a highly ambiguous statement and leaves the reader unclear as to who is the target of his accusation of 'dalliance', the traditionalists or the modernists. It seems likely though that his thoughts are focussed on the Academy artists but this, at one blow, overlooks the early modernists with surprising nonchalance.

The main body of the book takes each nominated artist in turn and estimations are constructed. Of most interest are the retrospective comments Rutter makes, and none is more historiographically aware than his opening sentence on Walter Sickert.

If there is one British artist about whom we may venture to feel positive that his work will count in the future as in the past, that man is Walter Sickert. We are confident that his place is sure not only because of the intrinsic qualities in his work, but also because of the impregnable position he occupies historically. It is impossible to imagine any critic of the future writing helpfully about British painting without mentioning the name of Walter Sickert. Historically he is the most important link between the great French painters of the nineteenth century and those English painters of

53 *ibid.* p.20

*the Twentieth century in whom we fancy we can detect the seed of greatness.*⁵⁴

This confident passage has all the hallmarks of a maturing writer forging a place for a leading member in the canon of artists who would find their lasting place in the history-making process. Rutter knowingly accepts that historiographical processes are inexorably at work and he is engaging in his role as the teller of a story which will proclaim genius and identify true talent that will break through the morass of mediocrity as the lineage of greatness becomes visible over time. Thus it can be argued that this comment on Sickert, which has a formulaic similarity to many other instances in which individual artists are singled out by writers as they propose members of the modest domestic canon of modernists, is *also* operating at the boundary which Hayden White, (and quoting Northrop Frye,) identifies between the 'mythic' and the 'historical'⁵⁵ because, as Rutter demonstrates, the reader is being asked to participate in a well-worn narrative theme of heroic endurance before greatness can be conferred.

This departure into considering Rutter's book as an exemplification of White's profound questioning of the assumptions often made about the notion of the almost scientific nature of history-writing I think will help to contextualise analytically the writing of others as more texts are considered. These will reveal the quasi-mythic story of the founders of a certain kind of English modernism as it becomes encoded in a slim, tenacious narrative over the next decades, a narrative that is more subjectively crafted than rationally chronicled.

White gives this process more esteem than at first he implies.

Yet, I would argue, histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.45

⁵⁵ White, H. 1978. p.83

*are made out of chronicles by an operation that I have elsewhere called 'emplotment', And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with 'fictions' in general.*⁵⁶

Gilman and Gore are considered by Rutter in a joint chapter and they get close to the esteem Rutter gives Sickert. Importantly they are distinguished by their true Englishness, '*...the most precious fruits which our native soil has yet produced*',⁵⁷ clearly positioning their work as of prime national importance. Of special note is Rutter's assessment of the two portraits of Gilman's landlady, Mrs Mounter.

*They have the reverent psychology of a Rembrandt with the colour of a Vermeer.*⁵⁸ [Fig 16]

This is a comparison that cannot be overlooked because it lifts this narrative of domestic achievement into the artistic stratosphere and represents a highly unusual and uninhibited measure of appreciation that is rare, but notably the comparison is not with the continental modernists. Rutter ventures into this effusive register again when he considers Charles Ginner.

*One has to go back, long past the Pre-Raphaelites, to the seventeenth century Dutchmen to find anything like this unaffected pleasure in bricks, tiles, and homely surroundings expressed with the same superb tact and refinement. In his paintings we may find... a great deal of the colour passion of Van Gogh but not a trace of his sometime wandering wildness; the iron solidity of the cubists without any betrayal of nature or distortion of human into geometrical forms.*⁵⁹

These are opinions which need to be borne in mind when perusing later histories as it a historiographical risk that this praise will be eclipsed by the more dominant refrain of English inadequacy and a mildly tragic story of unfulfilled promise.

⁵⁶ White, H. 1978, p.83

⁵⁷ Rutter, F. 1922 123

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.135

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.149-53

Rutter's chapter on Wyndham Lewis nuances, even challenges, the dominant historical position on his pre-War achievements. Lewis' sheer breadth of activities bemuses Rutter and he suggests this confuses his ability to estimate Lewis' worth. He recalls the pre-War years when Lewis worked briefly with Roger Fry but reserves the most detail for the Vorticist years. Rutter modestly says '*we were wholly unable to comprehend their subject-matter and esoteric significance*'⁶⁰ He cites the inability of the critics to understand '*Plan of Campaign*'⁶¹ [Fig 17] shown at the A.A.A. exhibition in 1914, but says all became clear when the diagrammatic principle of the painting was explained. His estimation of Lewis' Vorticism is guarded – '*whether the enterprise was worth undertaking is debateable*'⁶² and this position becomes explicable when the Wartime and post-War figurative work of Lewis becomes Rutter's chief focus. Overall this chapter on Lewis conveys perplexed and mild curiosity. There is little hint at this stage from Rutter that Lewis' work would set the almost unassailable pre-War benchmark of avant-garde art which later histories relied upon.

A year later, in 1923, a prominent survey history was published by William Orpen which aimed to cover the whole of Western Art from the Florentine masters to the present day. His chapter on '*Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism*' has no regard for any art produced in England and marks one of the earliest and therefore founding tendencies of this genre to write England out of the pre-War modernist project completely. Orpen holds strongly to the view that the radical art practices of the continental modernists were, '*...symptoms, as expressions in art of the unrest, agitation, and suppressed violence seething*

60 *ibid.* p.181

61 Usually known as *Plan of War*

62 *ibid.* p.183

*subterraneously in Europe prior to the outbreak of The Great War.*⁶³ This is clearly an example of a narrative that mythologises the fore-sight of artists and finds a historical rightness in their function as seers.

Orpen's next chapter on '*Art during the War*' makes a cursory reference to England calling Vorticism '*the extreme left of modern painting*'⁶⁴ He borrows Rutter's analysis of Lewis' '*Plan of Campaign*'(see above) and emphasises its role as a premonition of war. Orpen's opinions in this section of the survey have a historiographical significance in that he makes the argument that the War brought the artists to their senses and triggered a maturity in their work that would otherwise have taken years to develop. Orpen discounts the Pre-War efforts and makes the case that new and worthwhile art did not emerge until artists were inspired by the conflict, choosing Nevinson as his prime example of one whose greatness became possible through adversity and pain. This section of the book also demonstrates that even in 1922 the art historical discourse was still heavily inflected by the trauma of the War and the art that had reflected it. Histories were being written to remember and venerate it as a time of radical and accelerated development with barely any reference to earlier precedents.

The final chapter of this book was written by Frank Rutter and coming a year after '*Some Contemporary Artists*' could have been a further step in the development of his thinking as it was explicitly devoted to British art. In fact it is compromised by his extended lauding of Orpen, and Rutter's complete avoidance of any of the radical artists, apart from Sickert, he had praised so fulsomely the year before. It is safe to assume that Orpen had a large measure of editorial control. It also seems likely that this omission in such a widely

63 Orpen, W. (ed.) *The Outline of Art*. London: George Newness Ltd. 1923.p.606

64 *ibid*, p.607

circulated seminal book will have been an influence on the artists who were deemed worthy of inclusion, or consigned to exclusion, in other examples of the broad survey genre in later years.

1922 saw the first edition of Clive Bell's collection of essays, '*Since Cézanne*', which can be considered as a major re-statement of the modernist canon from his point of view at this time. His regard for Cézanne as the origin and inspiration of modern art is still unquestioned, but he uses this doctrine to locate the relative merits of the British exponents and measures only Sickert and Augustus John as having any reputation in Paris – the acid test for Bell. He does think there is '*... a good deal of curiosity*'⁶⁵ in Paris about Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Mark Gertler and Vanessa Bell. With large amounts, we can presume, of partisan venom he states his view on Lewis *et al.*

*The French know enough of Vorticism to know that it is a provincial and utterly insignificant contrivance which has borrowed what it could from Cubism and Futurism and added nothing to either.*⁶⁶

Bell soon announces Duncan Grant as '*one English painter ... who takes honourable rank beside the best of his contemporaries*'⁶⁷ before returning to the standard continental roll-call of greatness. Bell, later in the book, devotes a whole essay to Grant which, as a footnote says, was actually written in 1920, being a review of Grant's first one-man show at the Carfax Gallery.

Bell sees Grant as having synthesised in his art the best of the English traditions and the ground-breaking ideas of Cézanne. Clearly Bell has at least identified *one* English artist he can acclaim and this short essay can be seen as working in a relationship to a publication on Grant that Fry wrote in

⁶⁵ Bell, C. *Since Cézanne*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1922

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.9

⁶⁷ *ibid.* p.10

1923. Nevertheless this piece nowhere locates Grant within a powerful domestic modern movement, again strengthening the emerging narrative that individual greatness and distinction are anomalous achievements running within the mainstream mediocrity of English efforts.

'*Duncan Grant*' by Roger Fry published in 1923, is a slim volume largely taken up with twenty-four full page black and white illustrations of Grant's paintings. It has an unattributed decorative cover that clearly belongs to the Bloomsbury aesthetic. Fry's text runs to only four and a half pages but because of the scarcity in this decade of published books by Fry this essay needs to be scrutinised for his post-War views on English modernists. Inevitably Fry gives his full attention to Grant and he searches in his analysis for Grant's particular qualities. He somewhat ambiguously praises him for having '*a surprisingly large circle of admirers*'⁶⁸ - the surprise being because he thinks Grant is '*pure and uncompromising*', in other words immune to any ambitious drive to court popularity and this is linked to Grant's '*happy dispositions of his nature*'. Fry extrapolates this gentle personality into a reading of Grant's work that communicates a motivation to paint on the part of Grant which is insouciant to the point where worldly concerns do not intrude into his practice. However a more sharp-edged point is made by Fry that deserves attention at a more general level. Fry argues that there are two kinds of artists; those who '*...are attracted by what is sinister, ugly, or exaggeratedly characteristic than by what the layman would call beautiful.*' He contrasts this to '*those in whom the lyrical*

68 Fry, R. *Duncan Grant*, London: Hogarth Press, 1923, p.v

*sentiments are strong*⁶⁹ and transposes this latter aspect into an estimation of Grant that is slightly less than fulsome.

*This amounts, I think, to saying that artists like Duncan Grant feel most naturally those harmonies which are easy to grasp, which are fluent, persuasive, and can be followed without effort.*⁷⁰

This kind of comment reveals an aspect of the discourse concerned to position English modernists in a non-aggressive and crowd-pleasing critical space and Fry, having done this with great tact and sensitivity, moves swiftly in the next paragraph to his habitual reference point, 'the great modern French masters'. Grant is paid the compliment of being spared direct comparison because instead he is described as being 'peculiarly English'. For Fry this is expressed by Grant's powers of invention and the identification of this allows a minor but favourable comparison.

*He has, what is comparatively rare in the French school, a great deal of invention.*⁷¹

From this half-way point Fry concentrates on the quality of Grant's decorative design work and the reader is asked to appreciate Grant's versatility, which, as historical narratives often prove, can become a distinct career disadvantage. The penultimate paragraph in this book reveals the way in which Fry can, in 1923 only cautiously and tepidly appreciate Grant. This speaks of his growing professional stance of positioning domestic art with increased critical objectivity; an objectivity which, importantly for this research, lends strength to the wider narrative of a barely realised domestic response to modernity before the War.

In the slow process of the development of an artist Duncan Grant is still young. It remains to be seen whether he will get the opportunities to utilize fully his exceptional gifts as a decorative designer, or, whether failing that,

69 *ibid.* p.vi

70 *ibid.* p.vi

71 *ibid.* p.vi

*he will find – a difficult, but by no means impossible task – just that pictorial formula which will give full play to all his faculties, his charming poetic invention, his infallible tact in colour oppositions, and his melodious rhythm.*⁷²

Rutter's *'Evolution in Modern Art'* (1925) makes a major addition to the debate two years later. This publication is a much more sophisticated treatise than his effort of 1922, and has striking parallels to Meier-Graefe's seminal treatise of 1908, including the title and chapter headings⁷³. There is a bibliography, an index and a break with the simplistic artist-per-chapter format denoting that the histories of modern art were now capable of demonstrating a more scholarly mode. Rutter however adheres to his self-generated canon which, as has been noted, does not include Vanessa Bell nor Duncan Grant. Post-Impressionism in England is given its own chapter, reflecting that that this is becoming a standard organising principle in histories of this period, thereby consolidating the particularity and insularity of artistic development in England. This section somewhat wearily recites the normal mantra that,

*British painting, protected by national conservatism, has been slow to be affected by Continental art-movements.*⁷⁴

A second narrative mantra, very prevalent in many subsequent accounts of English modernism, also receives one of its earliest iterations, and therefore needs to be noted here as strengthening one of the cornerstones of the historical narrative.

*But it was not until after the first Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 that any considerable number of British artists were affected by the movements that had already agitated Paris.*⁷⁵

⁷² *ibid* p.ix

⁷³ Rutter used a direct translation of Meier-Graefe's German title .

Meier-Graefe, J. *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst: vergleichende Betrachtung der bildenen Kunste, als Beitrag zu einer neuen Aesthetik*, 3 vols, Stuttgart: J. Hoffmann, 1904. English, *Modern Art: Being a contribution to a New system of Aesthetics*, London: W.Heinemann, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1908.

⁷⁴ Rutter, F. *Evolution in Modern Art: a Study of Modern Painting, 1870-1925*, London: Harrap, 1925. p121

Also, importantly Rutter's overview that builds from this has in this publication developed a harder edge as he allocates an unenviable status for pioneering British modernists.

*But, whereas the Frenchmen knew very well against what they were reacting, few of the English did, and in their ignorance they imitated the defects of painters whose excellencies they did not understand.*⁷⁶

Despite this general hardening negativity it is evident that Rutter has now begun to find a more positive estimation of the Vorticists, and credits them as being, 'ingenious' and 'never meaningless' in their pre-War work. The conclusion is still reached though that their potential was not fulfilled until the War-time environment afforded this. Before the War Rutter says they were, 'merely exercising their inventive talents,'⁷⁷ so his overall position still promulgates an ambivalent message.

Rutter then concentrates his energies in this chapter on an audit of those whose works he admires, somewhat compromising his general disappointment outlined at the beginning. He has high praise for Lamb, John and Paul Nash and Robert Bevan whom he regards as 'a true and independent Post-Impressionist.' Ginner, the reader is advised, '... stands apart from all his contemporaries'⁷⁸. Illustrating *The Great Loom*, [Fig 18] and *The Back Staircase*, Marriott also stresses Ginner's European credentials which are forcefully described. This ambivalence which initially despairs of English isolation and mediocrity, but which soon turns to enthusiasm, is illustrative of a growing tendency in the historical narrative more widely. Individual artists are often rated effusively but are seriously undercut by sweeping negative comparative

75 *ibid.* p.122

76 *ibid.* p.122

77 *ibid.* p.127

78 *ibid.* p.135

judgements about the whole modern movement in England. It can be argued that this discursive paradox has a relationship to the prevailing individualism and the rejection of group formations during the nineteen twenties; the Seven and Five Society being one of the very few attempts to coalesce and combine the effort of painters and sculptors into a movement or school.

Rutter's next book, *Since I was Twenty-Five*, which is firmly set in the highly personal reminiscence genre, was published in 1927 and serves to expand the historical narrative. These types of publications, increasingly prevalent during the 1930s, came to have an important bearing on more objectively conceived accounts of the very recent past, and are often used as source material by later historians. Rutter recounts the arbitrary alphabetical way in which Gilman, Gore and Ginner were brought together on the A.A.A. hanging committee, and he also provides a colourful sense of the way the group that met each week at the Café Royal plotted to reform or abandon the New English Art Club, (NEAC). There is very little in this autobiography which addresses the merit of pre-War modernists but its emphasis on the frustrations of exhibiting in London add to the personal view that Rutter held that the reception of modern art was hampered by systemic snobbery. Even the artists are accused.

*It is not enough for the average artist to exhibit, to get a chance of showing his work to the public: he wants to exhibit with somebody better than himself. Names, names, names! In England we worship names, and have no respect for unadvertised merit.*⁷⁹

This invective has the hallmark of bitterness however, and must therefore be seen as indicative of how accounts, even those that are written by central witnesses, are capable of creating a narrative that perhaps hones the memory

⁷⁹ Rutter, F. *Since I was Twenty-Five*, London: Constable, 1927, p.198

to the boundary of verisimilitude and that is often capped by national self-criticism.

*But of all those who have benefitted by the A.A.A. Charles Ginner is almost the only one who ever told me that he owes everything to the Association.*⁸⁰

This is one of the earliest examples of the memoir, a quasi art-historical genre which develops substantially over the next few decades and which supplements the more impersonal histories.

Previously, in 1926, after some months of negotiation, J.B. Manson had been commissioned by the publisher Duckworth to write an illustrative guide to the British works in the Tate Gallery which finally appeared in December of that year. Its remit was necessarily wide but its lack of emphasis on English modern art is historiographically significant. Manson clearly wished to give maximum prominence to Hogarth, Blake, Constable and Turner. Thomas Balston, his editor at Duckworth, after seeing a draft wrote to suggest more emphasis on Burne-Jones and Watts,⁸¹ which Manson duly complied with, but the focus on pre-war modern art is minimal. As an illustrative guide it was unusual, given the stress on text and historical background. Indeed Balston, in the same letter said, *'the book is more likely to be read at home rather than carried round the gallery'*- thus allowing it to be regarded as more closely related to an art historical publication, although clearly for the lay reader. Charles Aitken, as Keeper, in his introduction, sets the tone, emphasising the dilemmas facing the institution in terms of balancing taste, trying to pursue what he calls *'a discreet via media'*⁸². In the main body of the text Manson gives little room to modern

80 *ibid.* p.199

81 TGA, J.B. Manson – 806.1.480

82 Aitken, Charles, Introduction to Manson, J.B. *Hours in the Tate Gallery!* London: Duckworth, 1926. p.9

artists, rehearsing and mirroring acquisition policy by dwelling at length on, '*two of the most potent forces in modern British art – Augustus John and Walter Sickert*'⁸³ Manson's dismissal of other modern artists relies on the dominant discursive refrain of poor imitative efforts inspired by Cézanne; Duncan Grant being the only named exponent given any credit for this domestic form of post-impressionism. However Manson's analysis has a fresher point to make as to strengthen a widespread consensus as to the weakness of the imitators.

*The painting of this influential French master was based essentially on a super-subtle perception of colour-values, which he developed under Camille Pissarro's tuition, and in all his work the colour is not only real and beautiful, it is essentially expressive. But his imitators have no real colour; they paint in dirty greens and blackish greys. And favour, above all, a sticky, treacly brown.*⁸⁴

In 1927 one of the most trenchant accounts of modern art was published by R.H. Wilenski which enjoyed a large, widespread circulation. It stands apart from the insider accounts of Bell, Rutter, Fry, Manson and others who were more deeply implicated in the mechanisms and machinations of exhibiting and reviewing. However, Wilenski is well aware of the theoretical discourse that attended the dissemination of French modernism and the fledgling efforts of English artists in the pre-War years, and this book sets out Wilenski's theoretical position in a preface before he approaches the modern movements in a meticulously-conceived classification. This preliminary conceptual analysis is thorough and confidently argued and it represents a discursive rigour often lacking in these survey histories of the 1920s.

Wilenski takes issue with Clive Bell's theories particularly which he derives from Bell's 1914 book '*Art*', calling Bell '*fundamentally wrong*' when he insists that

83 *ibid.* Manson, p123

84 *ibid.* 130

*'we have no right to consider anything a work of art to which we do not react emotionally'*⁸⁵ This denunciation leads to Wilenski's central hypothesis that must be seen as the underlying principle of his subsequent chapters. He finds Bell's ideas inadequate because he believes the artists of the modern movement *'worked without reference to their work's effect on spectators other than themselves'* and that their work is *'not romantic but architectural'*. Fry, later in the book, receives the same short shrift for the same reason.

In the main body of this publication of the late 1920's Wilenski tackles English *'reconstruction'* after the degeneracy of nineteenth century art. His evaluation is tart and he makes the by-now familiar accusations of mediocrity sound original.

*...in England, a movement which was called new, but which was always a tardy contribution to a movement that was the last but one, or two, in France; the English tardy pioneers being of course likewise surrounded by derivative parodies of earlier movements and by other forms of popular art.*⁸⁶

Wilenski's new contribution to this oft-heard point of view is that he locates the tendency for English inadequacy as far back as 1826 and suggests that there has been a thirty year time-lag in development since then. Only Wyndham Lewis, in terms of pre-War innovation commands any respect.

*All other artists in England at that time were either tardy converts to Post-Impressionism or had still completely failed to understand it; and that generally is still the position here today.*⁸⁷

As stated this book has no central mission to analyse English modernism but the asides scattered through the chiefly theoretical exposition of modernism as a whole reiterate the usual dismissive story of a lacklustre movement that more specialist books, as have been considered above, do not always present so

85 Wilenski R.H. *The Modern Movement in Art*, 1927, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1927 p, xii-xiii

86 *ibid.* p.119

87 *ibid.* p.122

starkly. However, it is clear that it is in fact the major survey histories that are so dismissive of English modernism which had the power to prevail in terms of the dominant narrative they convey because they, by their nature, were obliged to nominate the canonical artists and reject the also-rans through adherence to their summary format.

However, Wilenski's book was negatively reviewed in *The Burlington Magazine*. The writer, 'S.P.' takes the opportunity to give some support to the notion of '*significant form*' that Wilenski finds so irksome, and the review is notable for its accusations of Wilenski's inability to offer cogent alternative analyses.

*In short this book is a really remarkable example of inconclusive argument and complete misunderstanding of modern art.*⁸⁸

Two books published in the twenties that aimed to ridicule and humiliate modern art across the board need to be acknowledged as their outright negativity has to be regarded as part of the wider struggle for artistic status. E. Wake Cook, an old man by 1924, published '*Retrogression in Art*' which vilifies modern art in all its guises. He says in his preface

*... a great mass of artists and men of culture have so lost all sense of direction that every retrogressive step taken is regarded as an upward movement in the development of 'modern art'*⁸⁹

The book rants unrelentingly against all those who supported and practised modern art in all its manifestations. '*We have seen that the modernity movements are a nose-dive downwards to artistic perdition, doing for art what Bolshevism has done for Russia.*'⁹⁰ and he reserves special vitriol for the critics.

88 *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 51. No. 293, August 1927, p.96

89 E. Wake Cook, *Retrogression in Modern Art and The Suicide of The Royal Academy* ' London: Hutchinson, 1924, p.vi

90 *ibid.* p.187

Wake Cook's hysterical prose barely touches on the detail of English exponents but the Vorticists are classified as being part of, '... *an orgy of art spasms*'⁹¹

This book, it should be noted, is an anti-modern art discourse written with great self-confidence. It is much more significant than irritated periodical articles, as was typical before the War, although its bitter tone would have done little to win new recruits to the anti-modern cause. Nevertheless the book's existence demonstrates that there was still a strong demand for arguments that refuted the whole modern movement and which publishers could cater for using art writers whose chief critical efforts and sympathies dated from the Victorian era. Their main grievance was always that the grand trope of progress had sadly been dramatically reversed.

'*Frightfulness in Modern Art*' by Hugh Higginbottom, published in 1928, is a much more amusing commentary on the modernists and particularly their critic apologists.⁹²

Art critics are characterised as '*Mountebanks pirouetting upon the slopes of Parnassus*'⁹³ which immediately distances this writer from the mainstream writer/critics actively publishing at this time. What is of interest in this light satirical history is the extent to which humour had again, as before the War, adopted the standard accusations of parochialism and the derivative nature of the early modernists. In a section called '*Vorticist Vacuity*' Higginbottom says,

It is a matter for congratulation that our English artists are slow to adopt 'new' ideas; it would be still more fortunate if, in their ultimate adoption of such ideas they were less eager to swallow entire and at a gulp those of others. Usually some twenty years behind their continental brethren in the

91 *ibid.* p.17

92 Higginbottom, H.W. *Frightfulness in Modern Art*, London: Cecil Palmer, 1928,

93 *ibid.* p.v.

*adoption of 'stunt' tactics our English painters make up in zeal what they lack in originality.*⁹⁴

The joke then develops more whimsically, *'Having borrowed Marinetti's automobile the Vorticists attempted to run it on hot-air alone.'*⁹⁵

Somewhat surprisingly *The Burlington Magazine* also reviewed this book. The reviewer, 'H.W.' however wittily ridicules what (s)he regards as its false premise.

*It is to be hoped that Mr. Higginbottom will shortly give us 'frightfulness in Modern Psychology', showing that the human race is just as high-minded as it always supposed itself to be, and 'Frightfulness in Modern Physics.' showing that clocks keep absolute time if only you wind them regularly.*⁹⁶

In 1926 Roger Fry published an important collection of essays, *'Transformations'* that are wide-ranging and the format is large and lavishly illustrated. This landmark publication has only the smallest reference to domestic modernism being merely some appreciative remarks about Sickert's and Grant's drawing skills. It is possible to argue therefore that by this point Fry had no inclination to be inclusive in his essays of the English practitioners of modern art. It will be 1934 before he returns to an appraisal of British art, *'Reflections on British Painting'*, but which similarly marginalised modern art. However, further evidence of Fry's opinions during the late nineteen twenties is apparent in a preface to an exhibition catalogue of 1928. The occasion was a retrospective exhibition of The London Group, covering 1914-18 and held at the New Burlington Galleries. Fry's short essay entitled, *'The Modern Movement in England'* is telling in that his views are by now measured and dispassionate. Fry's analysis in the opening paragraph is that there were two distinct phases in

94 *ibid.* p.77

95 *ibid.* p.77

96 *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 53, No. 306 September 1928, p152.

the emergence of radical art, the temporal boundaries of which he does not specify, although the reader can conclude the War may have been the pivotal shift.

It has been a period of searching enquiry into the principles of pictorial design, of criticism of all the accepted standards, of daring experiment in the search for new possibilities followed by a period in which some of the results obtained by this experiment have been more and more brought into line with the older pictorial idiom.

Fry immediately follows his perspective on recent history with a more precise and perceptive assertion, *'The London group has done for Post-Impressionism in England what the New English Art Club did, in a previous generation for Impressionism'*, and he names Sickert and The Camden Town Group as *'a bond of the two'*. Fry's adumbration of a solidifying historical narrative then talks of the *'other current of tradition'* that prevailed, this of course being the influence of *'contemporary French art'* which allowed the exploration of *'unusual colour harmonies'*. This is swiftly connected to a more opaque idea.

The interest in these ideas led to a new animosity about certain phrases (sic) of earlier art which gave evidence of similar methods – in particular about Byzantine mosaic and early oriental miniatures. For some years there supervened a kind of Byzantinism in the works of these artists, particularly noticeable in that of Mr. Grant.

It can perhaps be concluded that Fry is referring to a pre-War critical tendency to deny precedents for modern art, but the point is not made convincingly, and the reader in 1928 would be forgiven for thinking Fry was writing with less interest and rigour. Indeed, in an unpublished letter to J.B. Manson in August, Fry laments the whole, seemingly thankless task of painting and, by implication, writing.

What a hopeless venture we wretched artists are embarked on in this country. We are always under suspicion and always expected to be filled

*with gratitude whenever anyone shows even the slightest understanding of what we say.*⁹⁷

By the end of the decade there had been few other attempts to position and describe Pre-War English modernism but despite this fading narrative there were still occasions when retrospective pieces were published in the art journals. Walter Sickert's essay on Duncan Grant in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, is illustrative of this. The article is typically self-indulgent and the point he wishes to make about Grant's greatness is arrived at with huge and disconcerting quantities of discursive 'baggage' from the past. Sickert, in his role as the prickly and provocative senior artist is most at pains to discredit the worship of Cézanne, thereby denouncing Fry and Bell by implication, and he goes so far as to elevate Grant above Cézanne in an ambiguous taunt in his climactic paragraph.

*Where Cézanne is papery, Duncan's paintings are fat. Where they are skimble-skamble, Duncan's are sound, full and resonant.*⁹⁸

The reader is given no idea what work of Grant's is being so highly praised; rather the burden of this article is to support the notion that Grant is justly occupying the position of the '*Grand Old Man*' in 1929, at the age of 44. This is surely a nomination that recognises implicitly a long career which is being sustained and that other living artists have been eclipsed. Thus there is, in this essay, a strong clue perhaps as to the lack of an accepted tradition at this time that had any sense of a strong, multi-faceted and sustained early modern movement that had emerged before the Great War. However the idiosyncratic nature of Sickert's rhetoric may inhibit the significance of this article as being

97 Roger Fry to J.B. Manson August 21st, 1928. Written from Charleston, Firle, Sussex. TG A, J.B. Manson, 806.1.330

98 Sickert, W., *The Nation and Athenaeum*, February 1929.

anything more than a small part of the historicising process. Further corroboration of this will be required as the historical narrative develops through the nineteen thirties.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this chapter's review of the chief commentaries on the Pre-War modernists that those who had pioneered new subjects and new techniques were only falteringly able to become part of the domestic modern canon and were even less likely candidates to enter the *international* modern canon when continental modernists were almost universally acclaimed for their momentous assault on traditional art. Secondly, it can be argued that there was what can be called, a partial critical failure during the post-War years by art journalists, writers and historians to build coherent evaluations of the art which had attempted to express modernity in England. For the most part, any hope of a rich retrospective analysis by commentators is compromised by one or more inhibiting factors. Those factors can be identified as: the War-time critical tact and retrenchment, the post-War context of a return to figuration in art practice that led to a critical devaluation of pre-War experimentation, an emphasis on the propounding of theory using continental modernists as the only artists worthy of demonstrating these theories, and a still deeply-established corrosive pattern of factionalised groupings of friends and foes in the art world who detracted from each others' achievements. These negative factors that can be deemed endemic in the art world of the period are also often working in tandem with even longer-standing tropes that England cannot escape its cultural isolation and, that despite or because of this, it is only excels in literary art forms.

All these causal factors are also processed through underlying mechanisms of narrativisation as historians and critics created a fictional shape for the facts as they were selectively processed in reviews, essays and histories. They largely adopted the tropical infrastructure that had been hurriedly devised before the War and arguments were condensed rather than elaborated. Further to this the institutions that could have celebrated the recent past with vision and commitment, particularly the Tate Gallery, chose to give their energy to more historic painters and sculptors and modern French art, thus exacerbating the narrative stagnation.

By the end of the 1920s, for all the above reasons, the debate had shrunk and crystallised to a point where at best, new thinking was in short supply, and at worst, only vestigial understandings were available about what was actually achieved before the Great War. Some effort had gone, perhaps disproportionately, into tracing the chief efforts of modern artists but often only as far back as their experiences as official War artists and as participants in the action. This necessarily minimised any reference to the earliest stirrings of a new visual language. Thus the dominant narrative, (if 'dominant' can be applied to a weak account of pre-War innovation), at this juncture is discursively inadequate but when it *is* proactive is most deeply invested in individuals; those such as Duncan Grant who had exhibited throughout the post-War decade, Wyndham Lewis as the un-ignorable presence as a cultural polymath, Augustus John as the compromise candidate as a modernist, and Sickert who held an almost unassailable position as the most canonically secure pre-War modern artist. The more generalised and feebly expressed background narrative of pre-War weakness and under-achievement however still provided the usual backdrop for the discursive

foreground and thus created a contradiction in the historiography such that the merits of the most acclaimed and valued individual artists were regarded as almost anomalous in art historical terms as they struggled artistically against the cultural grain.

Chapter Four

Past Sense

Introduction

All these circumstances make it difficult to trace out the course of British painting and to say where it is leading to.

This revealing and critically unconfident assertion from an editorial published in *The Studio* in July 1932 which followed articles in the previous five months collectively entitled, '*What is Wrong with Modern Painting?*'¹ Clearly *The Studio* at this time was minded to assess the present in some depth and its reflections on the pre-War past would be required as reference points. These will be examined in some detail below as they demonstrate some of the clearest examples of the default critical positions of the early 1930s. However, at a more general level the quotation above is also indicative of the deep quandaries of art-writing at this time and its relationship to the notion of absolute standards of quality and merit, on which writers sought to pin their arguments when positioning early twentieth-century modern art.

The quotation above, chosen to represent a mood extant in 1932, conveys an attitude of bewilderment that implies a failure of art's production and, importantly for this research, a weakness in its critical reception. It also clear that the

¹ It can be assumed that these articles were all written by C. Geoffrey Holme, (1887-1954), a well known conservative who was *The Studio's* editor throughout the nineteen thirties. '*Studio*' magazine had been launched by his father, Charles Holme in 1893, a well connected businessman familiar with the art world. C. Geoffrey Holme's chief interests were watercolours, etchings of the nineteenth century and the graphic arts.

comment is itself intrinsically immersed in the art historical impulse to find direction and narrative. This adoption of an embedded teleologically-oriented convention adds further art historical interest to this otherwise rather feeble pronouncement.

It will be argued in this chapter, bracketed by the 1930s, that the uncertainties implied above do indeed colour the critical output of many writers and art journalists, but that, as the decade proceeded a more insightful minor, but significant, strand of art historical analysis positioned 1910-14 with more depth, including the notable milestone of the 1937 survey by Mary Chamot, '*Modern Painting in England*'. In general however, the art historical output of this decade is weakly articulated when a discourse on the pre-War modernists is the focus of interest. The weakness has several facets, none more evident than the recourse to tired critical adages and the kind of critical abdication which the editor of *The Studio* confesses to above.

When taking an overview of this kind of hesitancy, and the preponderance of weary repetitions, it is clear that the provisional paradigm of the previous decade concerning the merits and demerits of the pre-War artists was at risk of becoming more stubbornly embedded. Serious revisionism was no-where in evidence in the 1930s apart from a notable re-positioning by Wyndham Lewis of his and his comrades' Vorticist work which will be discussed in some detail towards the end of this chapter. Articulating discursively with this critical inertia the younger generation of artists and critics were, at this time, eager to establish the newness of their 1930s modern art and so they, and their champions, understandably preferred to pay less attention to precedent and forbears. In chapter two I argued that the late arrival of French-led modernism occluded,

shaped and skewed critical reception of British efforts. In the 1930s other forces, equally powerful, entrenched and diminished debate about the emergence of modern art in England before the Great War.

The 1930s in particular offer another historiographical category in that a significant corpus of writing belongs to the (auto)-biographical memoir genre. These personalised 'histories' were published by those such as Wyndham Lewis and Frank Rutter who had witnessed and participated in the turbulent art scene before the War. There are also memoir tendencies which infiltrate the more academic attempts to position the early twentieth-century art historically as personal memories are invoked as a technique to substantiate a line of argument. This strand of bearing witness to the past, whether direct, as in a memoir, or more tangentially, as in more academic surveys, is to be expected, in historiographical terms, to have particular presence in the literature twenty or so years after events, as older writers strengthen their narratives with personal anecdotes and others explicitly write autobiographies. This form of highly subjective but authentic writing also found expression in seriously-crafted literary biographies, Virginia Woolf's biography of Roger Fry, published in 1940, being perhaps the most notable, a discussion of which is included in this chapter.

The emergence of more diverse historical formats either accessible or scholarly and, more typically, hybrids of these extremes, affords an opportunity to extend understanding of the underpinning techniques used in historical writing that this research emphasises. In the 1920s it was argued above that writers maintained, with limited success, the process of assessing the lived reality of the pre-War years using simply-constructed narrative forms to shape their texts and that

these collectively, when considered as a whole, allowed a reductive consensus to coalesce into a strong and binding paradigm. In the 1930s a significant tendency develops in the body of art writing which produces evidence of a clearer move towards '*the dissertative mode of address*', a nineteenth-century concept elucidated by Hayden White². This historiographic theory identified and differentiated the narrated story and authorial commentary in historical writing, thus creating a binary rhetorical device which allows the reader primarily to receive the shaped and edited facts of the past but also to be offered intermittently a secondary layer of interpretative interjections by the author, which importantly may or may not be accurate or valid. This theory of discursive form is critiqued by White as having lost sight of the more objective historical formats such as encyclopaedias but nonetheless helps I believe, in this case study, to note the authorial voices of writers as they offered their gloss on the pre-War years, a gloss which in essence attempts to say *why* events occurred. As texts are considered below, it will become evident that the memoir genre greatly privileges the interpretive 'voice' and the writing of more measured histories often has to strain to ensure its retrospection leans towards a factual narrative, albeit one that still relies upon strong selectivity and the parabola of a story-telling that White convincingly avers more generally.

In passing, this chapter will also relate historiographical characteristics to the cultural forces that arose from the very specific political and economic circumstances of the 1930s. The anxiety and austerity of the economic slump, the political tide of Fascism in Europe and the strong premonitions of a second

² See White, H. *The Content of The Form, Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*: Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp26-29

World War affected the way in which writers on culture and art sought to comment retrospectively on the painting produced in the years just prior to the first World War. The refracting effect of the present moment during the turbulent thirties was an especially potent filter, which gave rise to a growing imperative to situate art within a long historical consciousness spanning many decades.

When the pre-War modernists are specifically and fully addressed in primary sources I will make the case that, initially the narrative typically deploys interweaving elements of consternation, doggedly unoriginal repetitions and omissions. However, I will demonstrate that as the decade unfolds the debate becomes energised and problematised, chiefly through efforts to situate thirties modernists with more care and context and a more mature historical technique. It will become apparent that within this growing historiographical sophistication some supporters of thirties modernists wished to identify and emphasise a new beginning and were partially blind to early efforts, others were mindful of precedent and lineage and acknowledged the home-grown pre-War experimentation that had tested and explored new visual techniques.

The central section that follows is a chronological survey of key texts that addressed both directly and indirectly the emergence of radical art mindful of the fact that because the pre-War years only resided in the living memories of an *older* generation a process of more orthodox history making is now also able to emerge and invigorate the cultural environment. It will be important to sensitise my analysis to whether tropes of the previous decades have been maintained or abandoned and also whether the increasing diversity and

sophistication of the vehicles of on-going debate modifies the dominant critical paradigm.

The Discursive Trajectory - a decade of two halves

Despite the discursive irritations expressed in 1932 by *The Studio* cited above this section of the survey opens by noting a contrasting and paradoxical propensity to loyally support domestic art. It finds clear expression in a special edition of *The Studio* published earlier in Autumn 1930 and titled '*Thirty Years of British Art*'. It demonstrates a beneficent tendency within the critical discourse and reveals how the author, Sir Joseph Duveen, handled this critical mode. It was inevitably a broad survey opportunity in which he would need to situate modern art with positive enthusiasm firstly because this was a commitment and passion he persistently enacted as a major dealer and benefactor, and secondly because the publication's clear remit is to celebrate the recent past at the beginning of a new decade. In this essay by Duveen the approach is inclusive and fluid and the argument flows, without the need to demarcate and delineate groups and schools – an atypical technique perhaps more appropriate to the diversity and fluidity of artists' work during these three decades, and one which releases this writer from the normal quandaries of categorising groups and styles, and also significantly liberates him from the more oppressive comparisons with Continental twentieth-century painting. This essay is, therefore, doubly liberated from the tropical norms.

What arises from this freedom, although contained by its largely benign overall position, is an account that finds the seeds of artistic change as early as 1903 when Duveen says, '*there was new art spirit abroad in the land*'³. His estimation of the position in 1908 emphasises a gulf between '*enlightened collectors of modern art*'⁴ and, '*the ordinary newspaper reader*', blaming the lack of exhibition opportunities. This leads him to note approvingly the efforts of Frank Rutter in establishing the Allied Artists' Association exhibitions that began that year, but revealingly calls the project, '*a seemingly desperate venture*'.⁵ Nevertheless Duveen hails the A.A.A.'s role in catalysing the formation of the Camden Town Group, but quickly emphasises its fluid membership. The sections that Duveen devotes to the pre-War years integrate the careers of emerging modernists with those that were elected to the Royal Academy. The designations, 'post-Impressionist' and 'Vorticist' do not feature at all. The highest praise relating to these pre-War years is granted to portraiture, with which Frank Rutter emphatically concurs with in '*Art in My Time*' (1933) – (see below). Duveen's position is quite distinct from other, more prevalent styles of art writing which often agonised in their chagrin as to the comparative weakness of English art, and which were usually coupled with an irresistible but problematic narrativising impulse to define and identify discrete strands and schools whose story could be told through the lens of this quasi-fictive organisation⁶.

³ Sir Joseph Duveen, *Thirty Years of British Art*, London, The Studio Ltd, special Autumn Number 1930. P55

⁴ *ibid* p.76

⁵ *ibid* p.81

⁶ 'I believe that some day the best of their work will rank as highly in the opinion of connoisseurs as the best English portraits of the eighteenth century. But when I think that several of these artists, with all their immense talent, have had to fight and struggle for twenty or thirty years before they were able to get anything like their due, then I feel there must have been something at fault, or something wanting, in our social machinery for making the work of the artist known to the prospective buyer, the public.' *Ibid*. p.95

In contrast to Duveen, the polemics of *The Studio*'s editorial articles of 1932, almost certainly written by Holme, which ask the question, '*What is wrong with Modern Painting?*' can now be more fully considered.⁷ The articles ran from February to June 1932 and were immediately followed in July by a supplementary editorial article titled, '*The Younger School of Painting – GREAT BRITAIN*'. In August a further contribution by the editor called, '*Progress in Modern Painting*' written as a response to the strong reactions of readers was published. For a prominent series of articles bound by an over-arching, negatively couched question, the paucity of any reference to earlier achievements in modern art illustrates the author's desire to de-contextualise the present moment.

The initial five articles each take a theme to be explored: '*Internationalism*', '*The Pernicious Influence of Words*', '*The Superiority Complex*', '*False Economics*', and '*EVOLUTION*' (sic). It is striking that the neutrality of the titles of the first and last articles is over-powered by the negativity of the others, enforcing the distinctly strident tone of the series' title. '*Internationalism*' in the opening paragraph of the first article is seen as a force which since the War had undermined the '*native flavour*'⁸ of English painting. He regrets the way all nationalities have congregated in Paris. An original and shrewd art historical point of view is raised early on.

*This agglomeration of races produces what is known as 'modern art' or sometimes (amusingly enough) 'modern French art'*⁹

⁷ Significantly, or mistakenly indexed in *The Studio* without the question mark.

⁸ *The Studio*, February 1932, p63

⁹ *ibid.* p.63

This is arguably evidence of a small advance from an earlier critical rhetoric which had, as has been noted above, dwelt heavily on contrasting the vigour and rigour of French modernism with imitative English efforts. Now the emphasis is to promote the notion of a melting pot in Paris that eradicated national specificities. The article reinforces the point by referring back to the merits of Hogarth, Constable and Gainsborough. No reference is made to the intermediate groupings of late nineteenth and early twentieth century artists, thereby implying their form of tentative, but nevertheless intended internationalism, had barely contributed to the current situation as he sees it. The final paragraph escalates to a xenophobic climax and a plea for isolationism, a hall-mark of thirties critical discourse more generally, and connected to the pressing wider political realities.

*Britain is looking for British pictures, of British people, of British landscape.*¹⁰

Paul Nash, writing in the *Weekend Review*, published on March 12th 1932, immediately challenges *The Studio's* naïve parochialism.¹¹ Nash's concern is to disengage himself from any serious association with the idea that modern British art should be spurred on by nationalistic sentiment, but his chief purpose is to critique the whole series of articles in *The Studio*.¹² Despite Nash's criticisms he has a clear view which concurs wholeheartedly with the writer as to the lack of competence of current art writing.¹³

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.63

¹¹ Nash, P. 'Going Modern and Being British' in, *The Weekend Review*, 12th March 1932, Vol 5, No. 104, pp 322-323.

¹² Nash hints that he has already seen and read all the five articles that were published Feb-June 1932.

'each article is devoted to a painstaking mining and exploding of popular heresies.' *Ibid.*

¹³ "The Pernicious Influence of Words' expressed very concisely what many of us feel that the art jargon of a certain section of the Press is misleading to the public and does the artist no service." *Ibid.* p.323

The editor of *The Studio* had taken on the 'priesthood of critics'¹⁴, who he says had acquired too much influence and importance, which this time he does relate to the pre-War era.

*What a dreadful thing it would have been if Whistler has painted to please Ruskin or if nowadays Mr. Sickert painted to please Mr. Roger Fry!*¹⁵

This contrast however does not really serve the writer's purpose as the article continues by paraphrasing many of what are, in fact, much earlier theoretical positions and presenting them as contemporary 'hocus-pocus'; most notably the obvious, but unattributed, reference to Roger Fry's pre-War questioning of representation in art. Again a denial of origins and a lack of acknowledgement of past debates characterises this writer's polemic.

Nash's intervention and commentary in March, before the full series had been published, can perhaps be construed as a pre-emptive discourtesy to *The Studio*. However, seizing the initiative in this way testifies to his passion and energy as he sought to further establish his position as a cultural activist and commentator.

The third article in *The Studio* in April deals with, 'The Superiority Complex', and proposes that contemporary artists were arrogant; this time the outrage is expressed as a contrast to the worthiness of craftsmen. The bitter tone of this article reveals a set of attitudes that can be located in a wider prejudice that professional creativity is valued less than amateur endeavour.

This rhetoric can be squarely situated in a time when economic hardship and widespread unemployment were deeply troubling realities and which emboldened *The Studio* sufficiently to ignore the normal deference towards

¹⁴ *The Studio*, February 1932, p.164

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 164

those artists, who by their position in society, were immune from basic financial hardship.

The next essay in May 1932, '*False Economics*' again seeks to draw the real world into the art world, and its use of the language of economics, although rather simplistic, is not therefore surprising. As he tries to explain the faltering art market the author laments the fact that traditional patronage, and with it traditional subject-matter, has declined, to the point where all that is available is what he calls, '*purely and simply ART*', which is capitalised in this way as he froths angrily through the rest of the article. The case is put that society should be, '*leaving to the amateur the prosecution of art for art's sake*'¹⁶ whilst the professional architect, interior designer or photographer engages on the '*prosaic ground*'. This argument rests on the writer's belief that '*it is the aimlessness of modern painting that is partly responsible for its economic chaos.*'¹⁷

This impassioned essay, written in deeply distressing economic times, demonstrates through its blinkered reasoning a lack of historical perspective, especially of the recent past. In the panic of 1932 there seems to be no intellectual space or time to build a convincing analysis of the continuing presence of modern painting and so this devaluation of its purpose and a lessening of respect for its history is perhaps unsurprising.

The final essay in the series entitled '*EVOLUTION*' moves into a positive, but very shallow set of ideas for a revival. His idea is that all the new home owners should be encouraged develop a taste that means they will buy pictures for their

¹⁶ *The Studio*, May 1932, p.248.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.248

walls. The article's self-declared philosophy is that a wider audience is feasible for art,

*If they realised also that this is not an experience not limited only to the chosen few, but that everyone can cultivate that germ of interest in 'something better', which is inherent in the human mind.*¹⁸

This series of articles obviously caters for the readership of *The Studio*, many of whom were most interested in the applied arts and who would perhaps have shared the prejudices put forward. Only the faintest sense of the recent history of modern art in England is conveyed, and that this is coupled with overpowering, hectoring arguments about the contemporary art market and the amateur role of artists.

Of greater historical substance is Frank Rutter's quasi-memoir '*Art in My Time*'¹⁹ published in 1933 which is a book that crystallises and extends the judgements and memories of '*Since I was Twenty-five*' that he had published in 1927. This penultimate book by Rutter, written four years before he died, supports the notion that it is the memoir format that allows the past to be remembered with the greatest selectivity because it is a genre that allows an overt story-telling 'voice' to steer the prose; to include and omit, to exaggerate and downplay, all of which is propelled through the standard chronological structure of these publications.

The predictable and inevitable increase of this type of 'history' in the 1930s that recalls the pre-War years is relevant to my evidence base because firstly, these publications full of colour and piquancy derived from their powerful witnessing authenticity, enliven and enrich the whole art historical narrative. Secondly, because the genre actively requires the writer to shape their personal trajectory

¹⁸ *The Studio*, June 1932, p.325

¹⁹ Rutter, F. *Art in My Time*, London, Rich and Cowan Ltd, 1933.

to resemble diachronically-constructed fiction, often using a measure of literary licence, it is likely that these publications are particularly potent fuel for the development of a wider collective and highly mythologised historical paradigm. In addition to Frank Rutter; William Rothenstein, Nina Hamnett, Charles Holmes, Wyndham Lewis, and C.R.W Nevinson all chose this decade to reflect on their experiences in this way. In Rutter's case, with an educated reflexivity, he makes the limitations of the genre an issue from the outset,

While disclaiming all responsibility for the title of this book – the choice of the publisher- I propose to take full advantage of the limitations it implies. The intrusion of what Gibbon called 'the most disgusting of pronouns,' simplifies my task and narrows my scope; since in view of this first-personal proclamation I feel I am in honour bound to write of nothing that I cannot remember.²⁰

This turns out to be a coy disclaimer as Rutter's sense of history is carefully crafted in this book, carefully resorting to articles and archives he has privileged access to throughout, and thus this book stands as a hybrid publication that is replete with accuracy and subtle lines of historical argument. Nevertheless, he can, (and does) use the licence of the publisher's remit to mould his recollections into a distinct narrative – a narrative that bears hallmarks of the discursive mainstream developing alongside the (auto)-biographical genre. The quality of this writing also derives from his choice of evidence to explain the shifts in art practice and its reception, and draws from the less than obvious benchmarks of change, which lifts this memoir's authority considerably. He cites at length the Wolverhampton exhibition of 1902²¹ to pinpoint a moment of personal awareness and also thereby creates a fresh and earlier moment for an awakening of the possibilities open to modern artists. His precise and full listing

²⁰ *ibid.* p9

²¹ Rutter explains that this exhibition was part of an Industrial exhibition which had a fine art section. He relates that the Chairman of the fine art committee was Mr. Laurence W. Hodson who created a room dedicated to 'the younger and intenser artists of the present day' and states that 'popular Academicians were conspicuous only by their absence. P78'.

of the exhibited pictures²² testifies to the enriched nature of this supposedly modestly-conceived memoir. This full account of a provincial exhibition also demonstrates Rutter's almost unique characteristic of giving weight to art events outside London. More conventionally he attaches importance to the 1905 Durand-Ruel exhibition of French Impressionists. However, by 1933 Rutter uses this exhibition to sharply rebuke Roger Fry for his sudden (and later) conversion to the merits of Cézanne who had not generally been well-received in 1905.

*Where, oh where was Mr. Roger Fry in 1905, and why was not his voice heard in the land? How could he allow anybody to call Cézanne an 'amateur' with impunity?*²³

This comment hints at the rivalry between Rutter and Fry in their roles as pre-War exhibition impresarios and champions of modern art that had in practice not been a live issue for many years, but nonetheless still provoked Rutter sufficiently to score a personal point in print at this later juncture.²⁴ It also indirectly echoes his lifelong belief that Fry's canon of modern artists, British and Continental, was too narrowly defined.

Rutter's *'Art in My Time'*, like Duveen's article of 1930, also demonstrates a detailed grasp of the institutional forces at work in the art world often ignored or suppressed by other writers. Rutter gives much space to the power and influence of dealers, gallerists and the prices that new art fetched. He makes a bitter attack on the inefficiencies of the art market in Britain, saying that artists *'want a lot of help, which they do not get'*.²⁵ He then makes an impassioned case for tackling the problem at home and abroad laying out a strategically

²² Ibid. pp78-81

²³ Ibid. pp 112-3

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, in her 1940 biography of Roger Fry, suggests that he first *'caught a glimpse of Cezanne'* (p111) at the International Society exhibition at The New Gallery in 1906.

²⁵ Rutter, F. 1933 p217

astute way to market the '*...beautiful painting that has been done during the last thirty years or so.*'²⁶

It is also important to identify the assessment of pre-War painting that Rutter weaves through this memoir because its authority springs from his long-standing pivotal position in the domestic art world. Its evaluative messages cannot but be regarded as one of the more reasoned and informed tributaries of the historical narrative. The key opinions Rutter offers are sometimes indirectly expressed, for example the un-equalled importance he says might be attached to Epstein's '*Rock Drill*' [Fig 19]. He gives high praise to Lewis' '*Kermesse*' [Fig 9] significantly saying Lewis was '*in sympathy*' with French art – rather than influenced by it.

*Here for the first time London saw by an English artist a painting altogether in sympathy with the later developments in Paris.*²⁷

Rutter devotes much time to explain the secession of the Camden Town Group but firmly categorises the work as, '*pre-dominantly impressionist*'²⁸,

*Wyndham Lewis was the only member whose work could definitely be described as post-impressionist.*²⁹

Having savaged Clive Bell's treatise '*Art*' of 1914 with great sarcasm,³⁰ he also is at pains to identify Fry's on-going role as the '*arch-enchanter*'³¹ in promoting Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. Rutter's estimation of their careers is damning, only emphasising Vanessa Bell's flower painting, and pronouncing the kind of historical verdict that became deeply entrenched during this decade,

²⁶ Ibid. p. 218

²⁷ Ibid. p.143

²⁸ Ibid. p. 155

²⁹ Ibid. p.155-6

³⁰ Ibid. p.159

³¹ Ibid. p. 187

demonstrating the distinct impression that Roger Fry's support had in fact a deeply negative effect on his friends' reputations.

Duncan Grant has given us a few admirable pictures; ... But he has also painted some very bad ones. Whatever Vanessa Bell's husband may say, many figures in Duncan Grant's decorative paintings do not possess any kind of 'significant form'.³²

In contrast Rutter emphatically re-fuels the reputation of Sickert and says that the new generation are emphasising his role and importance to the exclusion of others. In noting that there has been a constant renewal of Sickert's pre-eminence he is clearly aware of art history's, (and fiction's), predilection to single out heroes and leaders.

During the last twelve years people have kept on 'discovering' Sickert. They come and tell me about it. They think I don't know. More and more have come to me in these 'thirties and assured me, very confidentially, that Sickert is the only English painter that counts....

That eternal phrase, 'Yes, Sickert, but who else?' has dogged my footsteps through Paris this thirty years or more.³³

In order to survey further the way in which the early thirties were served by writers who aimed to capture a broad historical overview that included the pre-WW1 years, a widely disseminated book by Eric Underwood can be cited. Also published in 1933, '*A Short History of English Painting*',³⁴ covers art from '*Before the Norman Conquest*' up until the final two chapters entitled '*Today*' and '*Tomorrow*'. Despite its breadth the book has a scholarly structure with a suite of appendices and thirty-two illustrations. Of especial interest to this research is Appendix IV, '*Modern School Influences*' where a diagrammatic family tree is offered spanning Western Europe and America which culminates

³² *ibid.* p.189

³³ *ibid.* p.216

³⁴ Underwood, E. *A Short History of English Painting*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd.1933.

on the bottom tier in Steer, Pissarro, Rothenstein, John, Orpen, Clausen and Sickert. This is clearly a writer who in 1933 is still extremely hesitant about any lineage after this point. Appendix VIII is another family tree; '*Ten generations of Master and Student*' which again aims to fix influence and lineage yet does not venture beyond Steer's relationship to Gilman, and Whistler's to Sickert.

Nevertheless there is clearly a new desire, on the part of art historians, to map genealogically in this way so as to promote the idea of deep structure shaping the historical narrative. This is a fresh alternative to the trope of schools and 'isms' which was still the dominant critical apparatus of modern art's history.

Underwood's Appendix VI is a list of twentieth century artists and each is only afforded a minimalist description of their work or role. A selection of these demonstrates the summary format which precludes any breadth or subtlety and reduces the past to barely more than a sparsely annotated list of individuals. In this appendix there is a wider roll call but one which condenses achievement in a way that verges on historical caricature.³⁵

It could be posited that it is this recourse to overly summarised text in survey histories that is most likely to displace nuanced and subtle critiques, and that furthermore these curtailed formats bear considerable responsibility for the propensity for the narrative to coarsen in these synopses towards over-simplified and mythologized accounts.

The introduction to Underwood's book is dominated by his rehearsal of habitual comparisons between French and English art, but he holds the view that,

³⁵ "Fry, - 'Critic and Painter', Gilman, - 'first President of London Group', Augustus John, - 'Portraits', Wyndham Lewis, - 'Vorticist', Duncan Grant, - 'Decorative', C.R.W. Nevinson, - 'War Pictures', Stanley Spencer, - 'religious subjects'", *ibid.* appendix vi

*The influence of English painting on French painting has been at least equal in measure and intensity to the converse influence,*³⁶

This is somewhat fresher thinking than the fairly typical and tired argument that is commonplace in surveys which usually culminate in wholesale deference to French art when the modern period is being assessed overall. However Underwood relies on questionable and crude estimations of national characteristics that do nothing to raise the originality of this introductory material any further;

*The Englishman, most reticent of folk in social life, is in conversation laconic, but when he becomes an artist lets himself go. The Frenchman, voluble as an individual, as an artist is restrained.*³⁷

The penultimate chapter, 'Today' purports to cover art produced by living painters. Its opening assertion has a tenuous logic and does not speak of any detailed enthusiasm for pre-War efforts or experiments.

*The Pre-Raphaelite movement was, with the one possible exception of Vorticism, the last native English movement. Since the pre-Raphaelites English painting has become increasingly cosmopolitan in manner and outlook.*³⁸

What is perhaps the most important feature of this part of the diachronic narrative is the complete absence of any reference in this chapter to 'modern' art or 'modernism' or 'post-Impressionism.' Underwood deems it appropriate to wait until his final chapter on 'Tomorrow' before making any reference to these movements that, by the time of writing, are at least twenty years old. Within three short pages the 'Today' chapter becomes an un-shaped annotated list of a very conservative selection of artists.

The last chapter, 'Tomorrow' retrieves the situation somewhat by attempting an analytical appraisal of post-Impressionism and modernism and other sub-

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 5.

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 6

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 204

divisions he unsurprisingly nominates. His observations are intelligently constructed, but the pedestrian catalogue style of writing soon takes over again to round off the book as each English artist is described in turn³⁹. This is prefaced by a disclaiming inability to assess their work as it is so recent. This disclaimer is hard to accept when many of the careers he goes on to list had had a strong presence over twenty years previously. It seems to be the case that there is a prevalent art historical nervousness in the survey genre. The entry for Duncan Grant is quoted in its entirety to exemplify the inadequacy of Underwood's attempt to inform his readers, and represents wider absences in any narrative of the earliest stages of English modernism.

The review in *The Burlington Magazine* in February 1934 is as unchallenging as the book itself, which suggests evidence for the low critical expectations made of contemporary 'histories'. The lack of analytical rigour is explained partly as a refusal to be subjective in his account.

Mr. Underwood is not concerned with literary style and even less than Mr. de Montmorency⁴⁰ is he concerned with a subjective method of approach; he does, nevertheless, add two interesting chapters on 'Today' and 'Tomorrow'.

As inexpensive text-books on orthodox lines, these last two will be useful to those whose knowledge of the subject is not very extensive or to those

³⁹ "DUNCAN GRANT (1885-), a native of Inverness, studied at the Westminster School of Art in Paris. He has exhibited at the New English Art Club and London group. He is represented in The Tate Gallery by, 'The Queen of Sheba' and 'Lemon Gatherers'." Perhaps Mark Gertler's entry illustrates even more convincingly that a book which has an undoubted authoritative tone and knowledge base failed in 1933 to grasp innovation and to situate its origins. "MARK GERTLER (1892-) is a former student of the Slade School, who won the Slade scholarship at the age of nineteen. He is a member of what may be called the right wing of the London group. His fruit and flower studies are remarkable for their lively and clean colour and their simplicity of treatment. His 'Portrait of a Girl' painted at the age of twenty, is in the Tate Gallery." [Fig 20]

⁴⁰ Montmorency, M.F. *A Short History of Painting in England*, London: Dent, 1933.

*who have specialised and wish to refresh their memory of the general background.*⁴¹

In contrast to the relatively barren opening years of the decade, the major exhibition of British art in 1934 at Burlington House provided a catalyst for many art historical publications of quality and rigour which can be seen as a historiographical cluster of some importance and a critical nexus. Before discussing this in some detail it is relevant to pause briefly and reflect on the art historical dilemma that writers clearly faced when events in the exhibition calendar prompted publications on English art alone. This tends to operate in distinct contrast to the discursive dominance of comparative analysis which typically sets up contrasts and discrepancies between domestic art and contemporaneous continental art. This has been an on-going dilemma that Charles Harrison has eloquently testified to in the published articles he has written since his seminal book of 1981⁴². In 'Englishness and Modernism Revisited', his later article in *Modernism and Modernity*, the dilemma and critical tension is presented lucidly.

*The truth is that it seemed even harder to treat English art as a case study of the character and development of modernism without adopting one or other of the two contrasting modes: to contain the subject and thus to maintain its integrity, by letting a nationalistic interest control what came up for the count as modern; or, alternatively, to maintain a larger sense of proportion, but at the risk of a continual and unpatriotic carping at small achievements.*⁴³

Rutter, unlike many of his fellow writers and critics, in 1933 had not yielded to this, but instead manages to consider the English modernists on their individual merits and his analysis was fully integrated with appraisals of the undoubted importance and achievements of their continental counterparts. The resulting

⁴¹ The *Burlington Magazine*, February 1934. Vol. 64, No. 371

⁴² Harrison, C. *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*: New Haven and London: Published for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1981

⁴³ Harrison, C. 'Englishness and Modernism Revisited', in *Modernism and Modernity*, Vol 6. No.1, 1999, p.78

account offers a knowledgeable and fair hearing of merits and weaknesses and is not blighted by sweeping impatience with the situation in pre-War England; Rutter merely regrets the outbreak of War as developments were beginning to take hold say that *'the new tendency to simplification was evident'*.

The course of true art in the nineteen-tens was rudely interrupted by the European War; but before August 1914 reverberations of these new Continental movements made sporadic appearances in England. P. Wyndham Lewis, reputed to be the finest draughtsman the Slade School had produced since Augustus John, made his own personal experiments in geometrical abstract painting, adopted Vorticism as a descriptive label for his ideals, and gathered Wadsworth, Nevinson and other young artists of talent round his standard. The leadership of The New English Art Club was also challenged by the formation of The Camden Town Group, with Sickert, Spencer Gore, Gilman, Bevan and Ginner for its nucleus.⁴⁴

Harrison, over fifty years later, is concerned to make the correct calls on quality and lasting merit, and at the same time to theorise Modernism itself, but he feels hampered because he would be *'crippled by the weakness of its examples.'*⁴⁵ whereas the judgements and appreciations formulated by Rutter are not wracked by this intellectual turbulence and hierarchical quandary. In *'Art in My Time'* early English modernists are given full attention in the company of foreign artists without the *'carping'* which characterised much of the journalism and writing of the twenties,- and which continued to surface as an issue seventy years later in Harrison's retrospective essay.

As referred to above, the years 1933 and 1934 saw a cluster of books published on English art and the explicit trigger for many of these was the Royal Academy exhibition, *'British Art, c.1000-1860'* held from January to March 1934. As has been stressed, the political and economic environment at this time was precarious as Fascism gathered momentum across Europe, and financial pressures for many intensified. This major exhibition and the books published to

⁴⁴ Rutter, F. 1933, pp20-21

⁴⁵ Harrison, C. 1982, p.78

both anticipate and respond to it, had been preceded by a series of talks on the radio addressing national character with a clear mission to rally morale in depressed times.⁴⁶

Significantly, the safe decision was taken to conclude this landmark exhibition at 1860. This was remarked upon in a telling letter to *The Times*.⁴⁷ The author, Edward McCurdy, questions the end-date especially as it was so much earlier than the previous exhibitions of Flemish, Dutch, Italian, and French art. He notes that, Monet whose work had been shown previously, had died less than eight years before.

What inference, it may be asked, as to the condition of modern British art is a visitor likely to draw from the fact that the period under review ends three-quarters of a century ago? The answer is 'none at all' if it be understood that the earlier date is a necessity due to the desire within the limits of space to illustrate monumentally the earlier progress of the arts in Great Britain. Otherwise what inference other than an unfavourable one can be drawn from the fact that no British contemporary of Monet or Cezanne is to be found in the exhibition?

This letter of protest highlights the extent to which a cultural inhibition on the part of the R.A., or even an institutional blank denial was being enacted. This exhibition, it could be argued, by withdrawing so markedly from the modern period may well have effectively made a contribution to an hiatus in the on-going, but sporadic, evaluations of early English modernists. It is becoming apparent that the discursive field became, during the early thirties increasingly polarised. There were leading authors, such as Herbert Read, (discussed below) who strove to register the vibrant contemporary scene but many more

⁴⁶ Andrew Causey has researched the motivation for the exhibition, but concludes that the fact that it was one in a series to celebrate the art of different countries meant that its role to boost national self-confidence at this tense time was unlikely to have been intentional. See Causey, A. 'English Art and 'The National Character', 1933-4, in Peters Corbett, D., Holt, Y., Russell, F. (eds) *The Geographies of Englishness, Landscape and the National Past*, New Haven and London: Published for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and The Yale Centre for British Art by Yale University Press. 2002. pp275-302

⁴⁷ *The Times*, February 7th, 1934.

merely looked much further back to complement the visual record on show at Burlington House, Roger Fry's 1934 publication, *'Reflections on British Painting'* being perhaps the foremost example.

This bifurcating tendency was reinforced in the Romanes lecture by Sir William Rothenstein given in Oxford in May. In *'Form and Content in English Painting'*⁴⁸ he only makes a minimal attempt to bring his audience up to the present. He gave praise to Spencer and Lewis, both of whom Rothenstein, as a great enthusiast of murals, recommended should be given commissions to produce for the Oxford Union building. However, this supportive, but perhaps merely polite gesture was not developed beyond this and the burden of his lecture rests on a heavy-going nostalgia for Burne-Jones' work whom he had known personally. His estimation of the modern artists, (including those who worked before the Great War, it can be surmised,) leaves him baffled.

*The perplexing element in much contemporary painting, its separation from the common interests of mankind, is the outcome to my mind, of a freedom unnatural to the artist's calling: at no other time has he been left so completely to his own resources. For centuries he has been employed to give visible form to the immaterial truths symbolized by the many creeds and dogmas which men have held, or to the might and majesty of the Kingly ideal... we pride ourselves on our democracy; yet never have the living arts served the people less, limited as they are now to small, fashionably fastidious circles.*⁴⁹

Roger Fry's last major publication before his death in September 1934, *'Reflections on British Painting'*⁵⁰, has to be seen as both a marker of the wider critical environment that surrounded the exhibition, and also an example of Fry's own critical heartland. The body of the book is largely the text of the two lectures he gave in January 1934 to the members of the Art Collections Fund,

⁴⁸ The text of which was published a year later by The Oxford Clarendon Press

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.31

⁵⁰ Fry, R. *Reflections on British Painting*, London: Faber and Faber, 1934

'in connection with the exhibition of British Art at Burlington House'.⁵¹ The preface, written to introduce the book itself, it could be argued, was an opportunity for Fry to contextualise the exhibition more widely, perhaps given his other enthusiasms, even to bring the account into the twentieth century. However, he chooses not to do this. Rather he creates a polemical train of thought about art criticism and snobbism and the distorting effect this has on taste and this is inter-woven with his long-standing views that British art has been, by and large, inchoate and lacking. This, by now familiar, set of views from Fry is crisply and sharply enunciated, but not overtly broadened; only the direct appeals in the present tense hint at a breadth of view to include modern art that he was perhaps implying too.

*If, for instance, we can discern in our past history causes which have been inimical to the full development of our natural aptitudes for art – and I believe them to be much greater than we are aware – it may help us to obviate them in the future.*⁵²

Because Fry had had such stature in the way English modern art had fared critically, even a text, such as this, which had other purposes, provides strong evidence of the weakened narration of its history during the early nineteen thirties. It can be argued that the intensification of the discourse about the more remote past, partially occasioned by the R A exhibition, operates in such a way that a partial narrative chasm opens up, separating the past from the recent past. This chasm clearly has to be bounded on the other discursive boundary by the liveliness, quality and proliferation of writing about contemporary modern art during this decade. It is therefore valuable and pertinent to note that the new wave of modernism, through its eloquent apologists, is increasingly and energetically present in the critical environment, and furthermore its

⁵¹ *ibid.* p.17.

⁵² *ibid.* p.18-19

characteristics are described with scant attention to origins or lineage. On the basis of the available historiography it can be proposed that a partial critical vacuum, and evidence of a degraded and coarsened sense of history, was the prevailing tenor of domestic art writing during the early thirties despite the efforts of Frank Rutter in his memoir.

The above assertion would be inadequately substantiated without reference to Herbert Read's writing on art at this time, and the extent to which from 1929 he entered the debate and went on to modernise the understanding of modernism itself⁵³. His position in the early thirties was not chiefly occasioned by a pre-occupation with pre-War modernism but his attempts to re-conceive what might be meant by an English tradition encompassing, sometimes only obliquely, the years 1910-15 are significant. Additionally his critical breadth and prolific output offers a route into the notion, already demonstrated by Fry, which suggests that Read's critical dominance left little critical space for others to fill. The idea that criticism can be stifled by a dominant figure has to be cautiously managed however, as the reasons why others critics and writers were subdued may have much more to do with the politically unsure climate in which art-writing was operating, which was closely related to the crisis in the art market itself. It was however also entirely appropriate perhaps that a writer such as Herbert Read, who became able to span the whole range of modernist expression, should establish himself so firmly. It can be argued that the self-belief and predisposition in English cultural life still, in times of trouble, defaulted to individuals who could build arguments from literary prowess. Read's credentials

⁵³ For recent scholarship on Read see, Thistlewood, D. *Herbert Read: Formlessness and Form: An introduction to His Aesthetics*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984. Also, Goodway, D (ed.) *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998.

as a scholar of literature gave him a singular and sure route to pre-eminence as Fry's successor which left his critic colleagues less qualified to vie for.

Read was 35 years old in 1929 when he began writing for *The Listener*, the new weekly publication of the BBC. He had spent most of the 1920s as a curator in the Victoria and Albert Museum which had afforded him a respected and rich way to accumulate a deep understanding of art from diverse cultures and an appreciation of the complex interface between art and design. His articles in *The Listener* and his contributions to *Burlington Magazine*, of which he became editor in 1933, along with his substantial books on the history of art published during the early thirties together form the evidence base for the way he commented, somewhat indirectly, on the emergence of domestic modernism before the Great War. 'Art Now', published in 1933, was the chief vehicle for his account of the nature of the historical continuity that modernism represented. A key issue to preface this analysis is the acknowledgement that Read did not ever choose in his writing to put a strong spotlight on the pre-war years. His comments on this period are either contained in his wide-sweeping iterations of the narrative of the whole of English art, or amount to little more than token backward glances when his intense passion and focus was firmly on the new modernists of the thirties with whom he was so implicated. It will become possible to make the proposition that Read's attitude to the early modernists, other than respect for Lewis, fuels the gathering, albeit faint, critical consensus that little of lasting significance was produced by pre-War visual experimentation. It will also be argued that Read delivers this judgement in a very different register from that which Fry's overweening Francophilia mustered, demonstrating that Read's views spring from a very different set of critical criteria.

It has been necessary, in order to situate Read's views on modernism, to appreciate the large body of material he produced on a huge range of art history more generally which in many ways is comparable to the breadth of Roger Fry's output. There are even arguments to marshal that his interests and output are *more* diverse, particularly as his standing as an authority on Romantic poetry and literature gave him a particular grasp of cultural production and a wide sense of the origins and impetuses of modernism. This also supported his authority to proffer his views on Englishness itself, this being a very prevalent subject addressed by many of the writers during these decades. Read however has much to say on this that is both insightful and well substantiated.

Both Fry and Read exhibit a tendency to segregate their views on modern art from their core art historical competence. They both seek to argue for continuities, and an implied linearity between the past and the modern era but their writings, by and large, divide very firmly into two categories: analysis of the previous century and before and, in distinct contrast, proselytising rhetoric about the modern artists of the twentieth century. This bifurcation, I would contend, has two driving forces underlying it. Firstly, both Fry and Read need to establish serious art historical credentials which can only be supplied by impressive scholarly attention to the past in order that they can authoritatively propose new canons and value for new untried art; keeping their work in two compartments in this way helps to hedge their professional reputations and career paths and thereby win the right to champion new ideas. Secondly, as has been referred to above, both writers are also subject to a tendency to 'write out' the pre-War years. For Fry his pre-War writing on the English modernists, many of whom were personal friends, turned out to be ephemeral appreciations, conceding quickly to his on-going passion for French Post-Impressionism, and his more

subdued output after '*Vision and Design*', published in 1920, which saw him largely returning to his roots as a scholar of much earlier art; and also writing much less and painting more. Read's tendency to avoid or ignore the pre-War years, on the other hand, seems to spring from his all-consuming involvement with the new Hampstead modernists that dominated his London life in the early thirties. His enthusiasm for the work of the *Unit One* artists operates in a manner which shows a very strong need to celebrate their innovation and thereby lessens the will to propose and highlight their artistic forbears. This inevitably contributes to the partial vacuum that has already been raised as a feature of the way the narrative of English modernism developed a patchy quality, allowing only a faint discursive interest in the art that attempted to break with convention just before the Great War.

'*Art Now*' (1933) represents another art historical genre in which English modernism loses critical presence; that is to say because Read's stated intention in the sub-title is to provide , '*An Introduction to the theory of Modern painting and Sculpture*'⁵⁴ he is not obliged to survey modern art production with any comprehensiveness. The assumptions and exemplars in this text testify to the way that his deeply serious theoretical argument relies exclusively on continental visual innovators to make the ideas that led to, and define, modernism most convincing. There is not one reference to any English modern artist, although there are illustrations of the work of some. National loyalties do not enter Read's disquisition. This may be entirely intrinsically defensible but it does little to create any, even secondary art historical role for Lewis, Grant or the rest and the reader is left to conclude that in theoretical treatises only foreign art will lend an appropriate gravitas.

⁵⁴ Read, H. *Art Now*, London: Faber and Faber, 1933.

Nevertheless, 'Art Now', which draws from a series of lectures in Bangor, London and Newcastle-on-Tyne, addresses the English reader explicitly and Read's preface illustrates his concern to cut through national prejudice and ignorance. Through this desire to educate and elucidate he feels moved to demonstrate modernism's essence and history by examining the work of artists who also need exposure, in his view, to a nation prone to blinkered insularity.

Positive criticism begins as an impulse to defend one's instinctive preferences; but it only serves the name of criticism if it reaches beyond the personal standpoint to one which is universal – that is to say, philosophical or scientific. This has become a commonplace of modern literary criticism, but it needs to be affirmed in the sphere of art criticism, which in this country has not been in any sense systematic.

The pragmatical Englishman is habitually content with such a state of affairs, especially since it justifies him in a hearty scorn of a phenomenon so disturbing to his complacency as modern art. The modern artist- by which term I mean the artist modern in sentiment as well as in circumstance – is in this manner gradually isolated. The public in general will not accept him at his face value, and is far too cautious to be convinced by a partisan enthusiasm.⁵⁵

This quotation substantiates that Read believes that it was continental modernists who enjoyed a critical reception environment that was necessary, if not totally sufficient (we can imply), to drive modernism's development. However a further nuance is unequivocally introduced to his thinking which is that a true objectivity, on the part of the historian, can only be acquired when he is distanced from any personal preferences, which effectively, in this instance, allows him (perhaps conveniently), to avoid the evaluation of English modernists. This is clear evidence that a discursive self-awareness was felt by Read when he wanted to both confront English prejudice and to establish a more clinical critical practice for art history itself. The bi-product of this

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp11-12

rationale is the omission of any recognition of any English contribution to the history of European modernism.

During the early thirties Read's focus, when considering the recent past, chiefly sought to theorise the trajectory of art history in general and to create a new understanding that moved on from Fry and Bell's ideas on significant form and to broaden their outlook to include German modernism, a significant new inclusion in the critical repertoire, not present since Sadler had offered his enthusiasms many years before. He also felt it was time for Wilenski's bias towards French modernism to be up-dated too. In '*The Painter-Critic*', an article in *The Listener*⁵⁶ Read, very respectfully takes on, what he suggests, is Fry's limited horizon and suggests that a wider appreciation would arise from differentiating the painter's stand-point from that of the viewer. This is a concept that, at this time, was a new way to conceive of how art acquires value and status. The importance of Read's discourse on this, with regard to the narrative of English modernists, is that they are not invoked at any stage when he is in full spate, in what have to be regarded as ambitious attempts to establish his theoretical pre-eminence. English artists are yet again overlooked when the deadly serious matter of theoretical authority and control are in transition and examples are required to consolidate the argument.

Read's major article in *Burlington Magazine*, '*English Art*',⁵⁷ again demonstrates him in a discursive mode that can be interpreted as a fulsome and calculated exhibition of professional confidence and competence. It was published a month before the Royal Academy exhibition, and like Fry's '*Reflections on British Painting*' uses the occasion to present a survey that can

⁵⁶ 7th December 1932

⁵⁷ December, 1933, written to mark his new editorship of the magazine.

legitimately confine itself to domestic art . Read's opening paragraphs tackle the well-worn and still vexed trope of exactly what can be defined as '*the English spirit*'.⁵⁸ He considers the origins of this back as far as the seventh and eighth centuries. His opinion is that Englishness resides in the expression of an earthiness and is often best conveyed through satirical observation. This amounts to a fundamental hesitation in the face of idealist principles. By the time Read arrives at his seventh section he has reached the nineteenth century and the evaluation is not favourable as he stoutly proposes that,

*... all that was gained by Constable and Turner – all that was recovered of the native virtues of our art – was to be lost to FranceI have no ready explanation for the seeming perversity of our national trend. ...they shut their minds against the modern consciousness revealed in the work of Constable and Turner, and escaped into odd sanctuaries of pedantry and snobbery*⁵⁹

He then offers his explanation of this deficit that has the economic preoccupations and the political awareness of the thirties built into its historical point.

It is, in fact, to something stultifying in the atmosphere of nineteenth-century England that we must look for an explanation. And, personally, I cannot find it in anything else but that final triumph of the puritan spirit – our industrial prosperity.

His final paragraph takes the reader intriguingly towards the twentieth century but Read feels justified in terminating his narrative in line with the exhibition's 1860 end-point. He finishes his remarks with some heavy disparagement of English Impressionism saying, '*it will never count for much; it has been too derivative, too devoid of native force and feeling.*'

His last point reveals the only hint of an opinion of pre-War modernist practice and this is achieved through, what must be regarded as, studied

⁵⁸ Read, H. 'English Art' in *The Burlington Magazine*, December, 1933, p243.

⁵⁹ *ibid* p 276

avoidance. The second-rate situation he believes has taken hold since Constable and Turner is only just beginning to be redressed. His words suggest that this revival is only just becoming perceptible to him in 1933.

*I do not wish to end this essay on a banal note of prophecy; but the conjunction in our time of a final emancipation from puritan inhibitions of the sensibility, and of a general return to a type of art which, whatever its content, employs the definite line and clear colour of our earliest and purest tradition, makes a situation of extraordinary interest and most unforeseen possibilities.*⁶⁰

It can be suggested therefore that in this landmark essay Read knowingly allows the partial gap in the critical narrative to become further consolidated. His clear narrative method is to tell a story of sustained cultural ascendancy followed by nineteenth-century decline that is only now, in the thirties, showing promising green shoots.

A more direct example of Read's estimation of the history of recent English art, published in *The Listener* in April 1935, adds to the evidence base of a rather dismissive attitude towards pre-War art which is by then a critical fixity. In this article on recent British art the narrative tenor is of lost opportunity and unrealised potential, rather than the possible argument that these artists' work could have acquired for him some measure of status as revered pioneers.⁶¹ Read's mild praise for the artists exhibited from the pre-War years is brief, but can be nominated as his compressed view of the early modernists at this point, succinctness being arguably a most telling conveyor of reputation and worth. This brevity means that Read's view of the then nascent modernists can be quoted in full.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 276.

⁶¹ The article was prompted by a retrospective exhibition of the previous twenty-five years of British painting at the Mayor Gallery in Cork Street. For further and fuller discussion of this exhibition see below,

The paintings by Derwent Lees, Innes and Gore might perhaps be accounted for as products of our insular tradition; but the others – Augustus John, Gilman, Bevan, Ginner, Roger Fry, Ferguson, and Wyndham Lewis – show that in 1914 a number of English painters were in close touch with the modern movement on the Continent; Wyndham Lewis, indeed, was right on the spot and but for the War, to which senseless interruption he was never quite reconciled, might have established a movement in London of more than national interest. Gilman, Bevan and Ginner form a very close and coherent group and are all three artists who, by Continental standards, deserve a much bigger reputation. Bevan at his best has some of the classical precision, the purity of form and deliberate harmony of colour which we associate with an artist like Seurat.⁶²

This crisp appraisal denotes the habitual way in which pre-War modernism is narrated as a false start in British art history and one that is barely worthy of serious attention now that a fully-realised resurgence is in full swing. There is a clear message that early work laid little more than a tentative foundation for modern art to build on. Read's propensity elsewhere in his writing to propose canons of English art and to establish artistic precedents is distinctly partial when it comes to the pre-War attempts emergence of a nationally specific modernism. The broad survey that is Read's natural discursive metier during the inter-war years is chiefly concerned to promote the much more sweeping view that the English had indeed anticipated the true fundamentals of modernism, but that Turner's experimentation had become transferred to the work of Cézanne.

Operating in parallel to nationalistic nostalgia occasioned by the economic and political crises, there was also a new vibrancy in the contemporary art world of the thirties that began to gather momentum as Herbert Read and his friends

⁶² Read, H. review in *The Listener*, April 1935, p.705

and colleagues announced their new ideas through the vehicle of *Unit One* of which the inception is usually marked by Paul Nash's letter to *The Times* on 12th June 1933. This vibrancy, as will become increasingly apparent, also has the effect of shading and down-playing the pre-War years. The *Times* letter pays homage to the past but it is the fairly distant past of Impressionism and Pre-Raphaelitism that Nash claims to have been '*invented*' by English art. He alludes evasively to other contemporary practitioners who, '*have come through many phases*' and who resist '*turning with the tide*'. This lack of specificity points to a more widespread, recurring narrational tendency to write out the *recent* past when there is a clear and explicit drive to start anew, whilst simultaneously attempting to locate some continuity and connection to the more remote past, in this case the previous century.

As has been seen in previous chapters there is a complex relationship between serious published histories, specialist journal essays and the more ephemeral accounts in newspaper articles. The latter were usually occasioned by concurrent exhibitions. References to the *past*, usually invoked only in passing in these articles, have a summary format which precludes complexity. However these summary comments have a dual implication. They can either be analysed as examples of an over-distillation of history, or, when crafted by a knowledgeable writer, evidence of the manner in which professional journalistic narrative hones the canon, and the attitudes towards that canon. The presence of this material can be argued to interact with and strengthen more measured historical writing in such a way as to be a significant element of corroboration and dissemination.

An anonymous article in *The Times* of May 3rd, 1935 illustrates this well. It makes no mention of the concurrent and important exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, '*Twenty-five years of British painting, 1910-1935*', which is surprising, but nevertheless is likely to have been its stimulus. This article, it can be said, adheres to a narrative stereotype. Its title is so general as to be bland, '*Painting and Sculpture*',⁶³ but its sub-title, '*Influence of Impressionism*' concurs with one of the standard historical start-points of modern art. This extremely attenuated account does not feel the need to declare its domestic focus, thereby suggesting that parochialism can sometimes be assumed, a contrast to the dominant critical format of lauding Paris and the practice of only introducing references to English art unenthusiastically.

The article opens with the prevailing cliché; this being that English art changed as a result of the exhibition '*Manet and The Post-Impressionists*' that Roger Fry organised at the Grafton Galleries in 1910-11. The writer of the article does offer however a more nuanced caveat before this standard milestone of inception is heavily placed fore-square in the introductory comments.

*All artistic periods are said to be periods of transition; but the accession of King George V. did happen to coincide with a change in English art which may fairly be called revolutionary, that is to say, in its effects, because it is doubtful if the change itself represented anything new in principle.*⁶⁴

This more subtle point raises what still seems to be a faintly contested issue in the 1930s. The quandary as to whether continuity rather than rupture best explains that pre-War moment is clearly an on-going debate, and the writer mildly hedges his way through whether the pre-War emphasis on formal qualities in art had an artistic lineage. Much more robust discussions of this are typically reserved for histories and theoretical treatises on modern art and these

⁶³ *The Times*, May 3rd, 1935

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

tend to cite only the Continental modernists, not the domestic exponents in England. The hesitancy in the above statement demonstrates a recurring and characteristic rhetorical refrain in the critical literature. There is frequently, as this quotation exemplifies, a prevailing assessment of the mildness and timidity on the part of English modernists and this is typically tied to mild, timid and ambivalent critical assertions about the origins of modernism itself. Conversely, the strongest opinions as to the nature and origins of modernism by English writers at this time are to be found when Continental modernism drives their theoretical self-assuredness.

Despite these familiar opening platitudes the author of this article goes on to make a complicated comparison in a bolder bid to strengthen the importance of English art. He likens the abuses that have arisen out of Cézanne's founding ideas of form, (what he calls '*order*') to the abuses of what Constable had encountered by being '*a natural painter*'. The writer of this article is attempting to say that both these founders of new ideas have been compromised or accompanied by poor practice, although this negativity is obliquely and politely expressed. He then reiterates the often-made proposition that art anticipated the War in some instinctive way, a trope of prescience that had been common during the 1920s that is also illustrative of a very specific teleological sub-plot in the narrative of English art and its presence at this point in 1935 is a notable vestige. The writer immediately commutes this idea of a collective premonition of War to what he calls an expression of '*social discontent*'; which can be construed as a much wider allusion to societal shifts during the early Georgian period; miners' strikes, the suffragette movement and so on. Vorticism and '*Blast*' are mentioned with such blithe brevity so as to imply that these events deserve little more than a scant reference by 1935.

Later in the article the writer returns to acknowledge those who began their careers before the War.⁶⁵

The omission of Wyndham Lewis is striking; reflecting perhaps that his main activities had in recent years become more literary than artistic, demonstrating clearly how the present significantly refracts the past when histories are constructed. The article ends on a note of optimism and its focus is firmly on the reception of modern art in 1935 signifying that at this juncture it was pertinent to emphasise that the sophistication of the amateur audiences of modern art were now competent and educated enough to respond to present-day developments. The dimming pre-War past could be safely regarded as an embarrassment that had now been superseded in terms of its reception too.

*... the average English person of 1935 looks at pictures with entirely different eyes from the average English person of 1910.*⁶⁶

This article has an authoritative tone and its usefulness as a document expressing a highly condensed history of the previous fifty years lies in its roll-call of the significant modern artists, and its commitment to identifying the stages through which art had changed. However, what must also be noted, despite its invisibility, is the writer's diplomatic intention to offer balance and consensus as he asserts the ongoing popularity and value of those '*unaffected*' by post-Impressionism, specifically Sickert, Steer and John. This journalistic fence-sitting, or safe neutrality, is typical of generalised writing in newspapers. It provided authoritative copy but evaded controversial judgements, nevertheless its narrative authority to both reflect and influence is arguable.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* The names he provides indicate those who could be considered to comprise the chief animators of modernism at this point. 'Mr. Duncan Grant, Mr. Matthew Smith, Mr. Paul and Mr. John Nash, Mr. Stanley and Mr. Gilbert Spencer, Mr. William Roberts and Mr. Mark Gertler are only the first that come to mind.'

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

As has been noted above, this article coincided with the exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, 'Twenty-Five Years of British Painting 1910-1935'. The exhibition catalogue's explicit homage in the foreword by Michael Sevier to King George and Queen Mary in their jubilee year inevitably biases its purpose and rhetoric. It injects an effusive tone that effectively prevents these introductory comments from being able to offer any critical distance or analytical rigour.

*We feel that there could be no more appropriate time than this month of national rejoicing for a display of paintings representative of the British artists' contribution towards their country's prestige during the last twenty-five years.*⁶⁷

This is a statement designed to stifle debate or controversy and it demonstrates that nationalism and the euphoria of royal events were still capable of a strong discursive intrusion at this time in the cultural sphere, despite the belief by some that a new internationalism was reviving and enriching cultural life. Sevier was charged with looking back on the previous twenty-five years to discern 'the vital elements of progressive activity' and to demonstrate an insular artistic self-sufficiency that could be convincing despite the long-standing tendency to denigrate and relegate British modern art. However Sevier's paragraphs have a partisan desperation that prevent his case for the quality of British art from being treated as anything more than promotional hyperbole. Sevier's final comments in his brief foreword reinforce the entrenched idea of the evolutionary path of art's development and this assumption justifies the paintings being exhibited in chronological order.

*A study of this itinerary should demonstrate that neither the hardships of the war nor the ensuing sociological instabilities could stem the progress of the creative spirit in our national art which continues to grow in vitality and in strength.*⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Foreword by Sevier, M. *Twenty-Five years of British Painting 1910-1935* – no page numbers in exhibition catalogue. Exhibition April-May 1935

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

This final flourish, despite its overweening rhetoric, can be noted for its clear intention to situate art as an uplifting constant in people's lives and to remain miraculously undamaged by global war and global economic upheaval. This rhetoric perpetuates an endemic feature of the promotion and critical reception of broadly-conceived retrospective exhibitions of English art. As an example of this sub-genre, (exhibition catalogue essays,) in the critical reception literature it is possible to nominate this text as representative of the tendency to over-compensate for the widespread negativity or indifference towards recent English art.

The catalogue lists sixty-three paintings, the bulk of which date from the War and subsequently. The pre-War paintings that are included barely acknowledge the radical transgressive art that this research is tracking, suggestive of its relative obscurity at this point. Even painters such as Harold Gilman whose post-Impressionist work had been significant in the Camden Town exhibitions, is represented by a much earlier work, (*'Interior'* 1907). Wyndham Lewis' discomfiting painting *'Composition'* (1913) [Fig 21] is almost the only work exhibited that had a significant position in the emergence of a new kind of art in the 1910-15 time-frame. This lends credence to the idea that Sevier, like other commentators, when obliged to record pre-War modernists tended to emphasise work from the pre-War years that heralded or sensed the iconoclasm to come. Painters such as Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant are represented by much later work contemporary with the exhibition itself and are therefore possibly seen as completely contemporary with the younger generation of John and Paul Nash and Ben Nicholson, thereby precluding from

the narrative any idea that they were part of pioneering experimentation before the War.⁶⁹

I now consider other, somewhat later, primary sources that maintained and developed the narrative of the pioneering moderns. The mid-thirties were sufficiently distant from the pre-War years to have allowed a generation of writers to emerge who were not close witnesses of that time. Their ideas articulate with older commentators who were still able to claim direct experience of the Camden Town Group, Pre-War Bloomsbury painting, and the intervention of the Vorticists. It will become clear that this blend of new writers and older witnesses produces a body of art history that is richer and more diverse than in the years immediately preceding.

'The Arts Today', a collection of essays edited by Geoffrey Grigson, is an example of the promulgation of the notion of cultural breadth that also gained momentum in the mid-thirties, initiated by those who felt inspired to identify and celebrate unifying ideas across the arts in England as a second wave of modernism unfolded. It is also indicative of powerful networks of writers who were willing to participate in a shared purpose, and the belief that their cultural observations would have a collective strength. Geoffrey Grigson, an aspiring, clearly opinionated poet of thirty, assembled a prestigious group of writers to each provide a specialist chapter on their respective fields.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ The catalogue appears to have made some dating errors, if indeed the paintings were hung as they are numbered as Sevier implies.- e.g. Henry Lamb's portrait of Lytton Strachey of 1914, is listed as number 25 – immediately after Ginner's 'Flask Walk' of 1937.

⁷⁰ Seven writers, including Auden, who wrote on psychology and art, MacNeice on poetry, and Crankshaw on music were involved. Grigson himself wrote the chapter on painting and sculpture.

The introductory comments are initially terse and de-personalised as Grigson proffers the discrete essays as if to emphasise a measure of objectivity.

*They (the essays) are meant to interpret, to make statements, to give information, rather than to persuade.*⁷¹

However Grigson's tone becomes beset with some anger as these opening comments move to his estimation of the overall cultural environment. His belief, which he says is evidenced in the essays on cinema and theatre and architecture, is that dangers are present and threats have occurred to compromise achievement. The remedy he believes cannot be realised unless work is allowed to spread its influence out from a small knowledgeable audience and he asserts that avant-garde art forms are let down by ignorant 'masses'. This elitist position is expressed with more high dudgeon than literary finesse.

*It, society) has degraded itself or been degraded in understanding below the level at which the artist is bound to remain; but I am risking every insult by saying that when democracy (as it is and should not be) tries to level all trees to the privet hedge.'*⁷²

It is Grigson's chapter on painting and sculpture which provides the conflation of assessing the contemporary art of the thirties with illuminating backward references as to causes and lineage that is relevant to this research. For an editor supposedly committed to resisting rhetorical flourishes his opening paragraphs in this section are surprising. The indignant way in which he laments the lack of audience understanding of art speaks of a commentator who is disillusioned and disappointed. Grigson feels he has to still allow for prejudice and widespread resistance to abstract art before he can examine it. He is weary of the task that he regrets is still required even in 1935. Given that

⁷¹ Grigson, G. (Ed.) *The Arts Today*, London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1935 p.xi

⁷² *ibid* p.xiv

this book would have to appeal to the less than expert reader his irritability is likely to have been counter-productive having an unintended alienating effect.

*What is generally called "abstract" art, then, the art style of the last twenty years in every country of Europe, the now receding stage in the unique vital process of the arts, is reviled and wondered at enough, even by persons of good mind, to make the now usual defence and exposition which opens every book or article on the arts, still necessary.*⁷³

What can be gleaned from this overtly reflexive attitude is an unusual contemporary comment on the formulaic lassitude of books on modern art, a trend Grigson wishes to partly distance himself from.

Grigson's essay analyses the history and development of abstract art using the idea of '*tension*' as the underlying explanation of its cyclical emergence and disappearance and cites Cézanne from the outset in this overview of the current resurgence, followed by the consolidating inventory of Braque, Picasso, Leger and so on. The next section expounds on the distant origins to be identified in the Magdalenian cave paintings and Grigson builds his discursive authority through a detailed foray into an archaeological knowledge base as he makes the case for a distinction between '*abstraction*' and '*half-abstraction*'.

Sections V and VI enact the dichotomy that had such a pervasive grip on art writing of this period. He makes a strong separation by addressing firstly '*Four Abroad*' and then '*Four in England*' to illustrate his analysis of the modern movement.

'*Four Abroad*' is an exposition on the work of Brancusi, Klee, Miro and Héliou, all of whom, according to Grigson, espouse the '*half-abstraction*' he values and the section is set in the contemporary context. The next section, '*Four in England*' nominates Lewis, Moore, Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood and

⁷³ *ibid* p.72

its stance is to situate the work of these artists, especially Lewis, in an historical context. Grigson's rationale for this segmentation is announced at the outset and its justification lies in the historiographical realities he believes are still extant and with which he concurs.

*I have a reason for not mixing the artists of Europe and the artists of England. Even the best of the artists of England are separate; and when the best with the worse have been praised for their 'Englishness' they have often been praised for amateur qualities, for provincial quirks, for eccentricities which come from being tangent to the circle of Europe. They are not praised for being artists, or even for those good qualities which grow out in them from a social tradition;*⁷⁴

This historiographical defence soon transposes into value-laden art history however as Grigson lambasts English art itself until the point at which he declares,

*The pre-Raphaelites were as provincial and as vulgar as anything which they disliked, and the first artist to give a creative kick to the sleeping lady seems to me to have been Mr. Wyndham Lewis.*⁷⁵

Regardless of the views expressed in these comments it is apparent that the discursive mode when English modern art was being historically situated shows that the arguments were capable of being developed in a way that interweaves historiography and history.

Grigson goes on to extol the virtues of Lewis, measuring him as an equal of Picasso as they both, '*ran from the white line*'⁷⁶. He suggests Lewis' failings were derived from his pursuits as a writer. He goes on to spend some time suggesting the inspiration for Lewis' style, citing the kinds of Oceanic art to be found in the ethnographical gallery of The British Museum. The praise for Lewis

⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.96

⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.97

⁷⁶ *ibid.* p.97

builds effusively to the point where Grigson says he is, '*the only important English artist of this century and names him as a 'Leonardo type of artist .'*'⁷⁷

Grigson's confident analysis over several pages manages to make the case for Lewis' pre-eminence, (along with Moore also, it has to be noted) without any direct reference to any particular painting and only one illustration ⁷⁸. The text however is loaded with literary extravagance suggestive of the notion that this literary writer, occupying a role as an art historian in this essay, is unable or unwilling to immerse himself in the visual evidence for his opinions. It is this bias which allows this text to strengthen the argument that the writing associated with the visual medium during the thirties was often liable to be skewed into the realm of literary criticism and that Lewis himself as a literary as well as artistic figure could not but succumb to this tendency.

'*The Arts Today*', as a collection of intellectually robust essays, clearly laid down analytical markers in an environment that still believed modern art to be largely misunderstood. The review of Grigson's collection in *The Burlington Magazine* by 'G.P.-J' in March 1936 quibbles that the readership of this book would perhaps be perplexed by a curious blend of assumptions and esoteric arguments.

*...while the articles assembled by Mr. Grigson are terse and allusive to a degree that would appear to make them too concentrated a first dose for the type of reader for whom they are meant, unless we should regard them as rather as designed to tidy up into coherent form the odd scraps of knowledge which the ordinary cultivated person interested in contemporary art possesses already.*⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p 101

⁷⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *Archimedes Reconnoitring The Enemy Fleet*, 1924

⁷⁹ *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 68 No 396 p.153.

This quotation throws into relief a clear view that audiences, despite the optimism of the writer in *The Times* (see above), are lagging behind in their appreciation of modern art.

What can be noted is that alongside publications such as Grigson's, attempts to theorise the professions of art critic, art historians and the education of art students were produced that aimed to recommend how to understand and appreciate art, and in general the whole panorama of painting and sculpture was addressed rather than the mysteries of modern art. As has been discussed, '*The Modern Movement in Art*' by R.H. Wilenski, first published in 1927 but reprinted several times during the thirties, had been significantly disseminated and had received much serious comment. He complemented this in 1934 in '*The Study of Art*' which sets out a hugely ambitious potential usefulness to,

...lay spectators of the objects produced by artists, with ways of thinking about art, and with the work proper to various types of students.⁸⁰

This book could be regarded as somewhat tangential to the central purpose of this research but it has a particular passion and mission that reveals a clear need in the thirties to describe and differentiate the role of the art critic, the art historian and the lay spectator and that this, in Wilenski's view, can be fostered by robust curriculum development in art schools and universities. He offers a thorough blueprint for how this can be achieved. He argues for the possibility of rigorous expertise especially when the value of living artists is being assessed. Despite a dictatorial, clinical and taxonomic approach to his subject Wilenski is tempted into expressing views on the critical environment of the thirties to make a point about the universal truths of analysing art ; and in the process takes a serious swipe at Herbert Read. Wilenski is clearly arguing for a longer more

⁸⁰ Wilenski, R.H. *The Study of Art*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1934 p.11

considered perspective on modernism, and not a rash estimation of its immediate transgressive impact.

I must add here that, as I see things, there is no more fatal obstacle to the study of art – by which it must be remembered I mean firstly and fundamentally the study of the activity now producing pictures, sculptures etc. – than the notion that art is now more various and complex than it was in the past. But that notion is particularly widespread. We meet it today not only in writings by those specially concerned to uphold and increase the acquired values of objects surviving from the past but also in writings by serious and sympathetic students of contemporary productions. We meet it even in the writings of Herbert Read.⁸¹

Wilenski then quotes from Read's 'Art Now' (1933) in which Read proposes that 'complexity' had begun at the end of the nineteenth century. Wilenski then challenges this by saying that this is an arbitrary date based on a tendency for art historians to propose radical change that date from when they themselves were born. He then mischievously offers a full '*emendation of Read's text*' to make his point forcefully, and somewhat indulgently. This liberty that Wilenski takes, rather inappropriately for its time, I would wish to cite as evidence of the self-awareness that critics and historians were moved to introduce into their writing. It is as if issues such as critical distance were requiring this kind of sardonic look at professional practice as their analytical powers were becoming more visible and therefore open to question.

Wilenski's book has also been fore-grounded in this section, despite its few references to English modernists, in order to substantiate the view that there was a discourse running in parallel to specialist published histories of modernism during the thirties, and that these types of publications reveal that serious commentators like Wilenski, felt the need to emphasise weaknesses in the mechanics of the critical reception of art and, as a matter of urgency, to theorise and segment its various facets.

⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 72

As the thirties unfolded it became clear that the accounts of how modernism were further reiterated would also heavily depend on the memoir and biography genres, and to some degree the publication of this type of 'history' takes up a central position in the historiography. Other formats were offered to the specialist and lay reader of a more scholarly quality notably '*Modern Painting in England*' by Mary Chamot (1937), '*A Key to Modern Painting*' by Charles Marriott (1938) and '*Modern Masterpieces*' by Frank Rutter (1936). These three publications largely comprise the immediate pre-World War II bibliography of domestic modern art history and will be considered as the culminating focus of this chapter.

However, prior to a critique of the memoirs and the more academic surveys of the late thirties, brief attention must be given to secondary publications that undoubtedly contributed to the narrative of recent art history that had widespread circulation. In 1938 Pelican Books published, '*Art in England*' edited by R.S. Lambert, who was a former editor of *The Listener*. It was an accessible paperback tied into its Pelican's signature non-fiction category and, like all other books published after 1938 in this series, it had a print run of over 50,000. It comprised twenty-one essays, all but one of which had been published in *The Listener*, and some of which had been broadcast on the radio. However, the compilation into a paperback book is a significant historiographical development because of its stated purpose, editing decisions, and a powerful and emphasising repetition of the material chosen for inclusion. The opening lines of the introduction by Lambert are also of note for anyone wishing to chart the history of art publishing during these years.

Oddly enough, there is no easily accessible and up-to-date book on Art in this country for the general reader. There are historical accounts of art

*movements, studies of particular painters and sculptors, and various memoirs and studies by leading artists and art critics. These are all very well for the minority professionally interested in art, or for the trained amateur; but they do not meet the needs of that large and increasing section of the public which is becoming more and more interested in the visual arts and perhaps, at the same time, more and more puzzled about their present development.*⁸²

A superficial resemblance to Fry's anthology of his writing '*Vision and Design*' (1920) can perhaps be mooted, however, '*Art in England*' lacks the weight, influence and authority of Fry's collected essays and its extreme eclecticism does little to redress the gap Lambert's anthology says it is attempting to fill.

By the late thirties, as has been mentioned, the participants in the pre-War modern world art were reaching a reflective age. Those who had sustained their careers, and were of a literary disposition, began to chronicle their recollections and views; Wyndham Lewis and C.R.W. Nevinson being key examples. Others such as Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell steered clear of this, perhaps because the differentiation of roles and talents within the Bloomsbury grouping, literary and artistic, was a strong deterrent. A further complexity within this genre arises through the publication in 1940 of the biography of Roger Fry by Virginia Woolf, a life-long friend, participant and witness to the events central to his life-story.

The presence of important memoirs, biographies and autobiographies during these years, alongside journalism and professionally crafted art history, creates a discursive complexity that impacts on the overall narrative. It also raises theoretical questions as to authority, veracity and the influence of a more fictive undercurrent in the total output of this period before the Second World War that requires some consideration. Theorists of autobiography offer an insight into the nature of this broad genre that can guide the consideration of this type of

⁸² Lambert, R.S., (ed.) *Art in England*, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd. 1938.

material within this historiographical survey. It can also be asserted that the dominant narrative of modern art's emergence on England cannot be fully understood without examination of this material and that the late thirties were especially endowed with these quasi-historical formats.

Laura Marcus offers ways to distinguish (auto)biography from memoir-writing; the former being '*the evocation of a life as a totality*' and is an, '*attempt to understand the self and explain the self to others*'⁸³ the latter being much more anecdotal. On this basis the accounts such as those offered offered by Lewis in '*Blasting and Bombardiering*'(1937) has strong memoir quality, Nevinson in '*Paint and Prejudice*' (1937) exemplifies the autobiographical mode and the Woolf book on Fry(1940) is an orthodox biographical exercise.

Marcus also draws attention to the vexed question of intention which she says goes beyond matters of simple authorial intention and into the debate as to the reception of these texts and their veracity.

*The concept of 'intention' pervades discussions of autobiography: it not only refers to an authorial motive governing the production of the text, but becomes an elaborate structure which apparently defines the ways in which the text should be received. In a number of cases, it is used to resolve the intractable problem of 'referentiality' – that is, the kind and degree of 'truth' that can be expected from autobiographical writing.*⁸⁴

This quotation, and its further elaboration in Marcus' book, amounts to a warning caveat as to how history is moulded by retrospective literary life-stories in particular ways involving measures of identity formulation and adjustments for posterity. These can be conscious or unconscious constructs that amount to highly personalised refractions of history and vehicles of the imaginative licence that anecdotal writing affords. Nevertheless their popularity and wide circulation

⁸³ Marcus, L. *Auto/biographical Discourses: theory, criticism, practice*, Manchester, New York, Manchester University press, 1994. P3

⁸⁴ *ibid.* p.3

inevitably mean their contents supplement the more academic accounts as a consensual historical narrative accretes.

In 1937 Wyndham Lewis published '*Blasting and Bombardiering*', ostensibly a War memoir, but inevitably infused by his glances back to the pre-war period. The pervasive trope is to make his history as an artist and recent political history indivisible, and to bring the political tensions of the late thirties firmly into his retrospective narrative as well. As a professional bonus this topical relevance no doubt gave a welcome fillip to his important exhibition at the Leicester Galleries the same year.

Lewis' personalised proposition is that art and politics became mutually implicated during the Vorticist period, but that this was not understood by him at the time. This echoes the familiar *post-hoc* idea that pre-War artists had prophetic powers shown by the turbulence in their visual language which heralded disaster on a global scale. However, Lewis summoning the well-worn idea develops a discursive theme that is complex.

*Really all this organised disturbance was Art behaving as if it were Politics. But I swear I did not know it. It may in fact have been politics. I see that now. Indeed it must have been. But I was unaware of the fact: I believed that this was the way artists were always received; a somewhat tumultuous reception, perhaps, but after all why not? I mistook the agitation in the audience for the sign of an awakening of the emotions of artistic sensibility. And then I assumed too that artists always formed militant groups.*⁸⁵

This quotation presents art and politics as *analogous* upheavals and that this notion emphasises the violence and disturbance of both. Similarly, early in the memoir he says, '*You will be astonished to find how like art is to war, I mean 'modernist' art.*'⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Lewis L. *Blasting and Bombardiering*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937 p.35

⁸⁶ *ibid* p.4

At other points the role Lewis played is described with more accessible meaning, rehearsing his artistic prescience. He suggests that the widespread view that his work was prophetic of war has been a heavy burden to his reputation ever since – a burden he hopes this memoir will expunge.

*It is somewhat depressing to consider how as an artist one is always holding the mirror up to politics without knowing it. My picture called 'The Plan of War' painted six months before the Great War 'broke out', as we say, depresses me. A prophet is a most unoriginal person: all he is doing is imitating something that is not there, but soon will be. With me war and art have been mixed up from the start. It is still. I wish I could get away from war. This book is perhaps an attempt to do so.*⁸⁷

The complexity develops further as Lewis uses a pervasive trope of war to infuse his accounts of how Vorticism vied with Futurism in pre-War London.

Putsches took place every month or so.... Marinetti for instance., Marinetti brought off a Futurist Putsch about this time.

*It started in Bond Street. I counter-putsched. I assembled in Greek Street a determined band of miscellaneous anti-Futurists.*⁸⁸

Two years later Lewis' rhetoric in his essay, '*The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks*' builds a different critical momentum, being concerned chiefly to distance himself even further from his pre-War experimentation, which is discussed more fully below.

C.R.W. Nevinson's autobiography, also of 1937, has a conversational style that blends a description of the chronological sequence of events and personal reactions to those events that offers memories of how things felt at the time to him. He also allows himself a longer retrospective analysis of the long-term significance of these events at regular intervals so as to make clear how he now regards the past. This technique produces a double focus on the part of Nevinson as narrator as he covers the years before the War and the effect is

⁸⁷ *ibid* p.4

⁸⁸ *ibid.* p.36

accessible and compelling. The years of experimentation before the War are described in such a way as to give much prominence to the influence of Marinetti with whom Nevinson published , 'Vital English Art' in *The Times*, *The Observer* and *Daily Mail* as a rallying cry for a revival of optimism and energy.

Nevinson's stormy relationship with Lewis is also laid bare, and by 1937 he has the ability to combine generosity towards their shared history with the recounting of hugely negative episodes from the past. This is an honesty not always to be found when writers reminisce but is also a complicated narrative device to handle. Nevinson manages to capture in his recounting of their pre-War encounters an art world where the energy expended in a shifting flux of allegiances and alliances seemed to vie with the activity of painting itself, where commercial considerations and social networking dominated the creative environment. However this section, and many others like it, have to be regarded as filtered through the passage of time to the point where the veracity lies with the sentiments of the present, that is 1937, and not the precise nature of events and feelings in the pre-War years being accurately remembered. Recalling 1913 Nevinson says,

In the meanwhile P. Wyndham Lewis and I had become friendly, partly because he had asked me to join his party against Fry and the Omega workshop. To quote his letter, he felt Fry was, ' a shark in esthetic waters and in any case only a survival of the greenery-gallery nineties.'

I found Lewis the most brilliant theorist I had ever met. He was charming and I shall always look back with gratitude to the enchanted time I spent with him. I little knew that he was to become my enemy. It is said that he suffers from thinking he is unpopular, but this not so. He is essentially histrionic and enjoys playing a role; being misunderstood is one of his pleasures. A good talker, to be understood would mean, in his estimation, to be obvious. He likes to keep himself to himself. If only he would. However, I am anticipating. We were friendly then.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Nevinson, C.R.W., *Paint and Prejudice*, London: Methuen, 1937 p.76

This quotation demonstrates a further aspect of the autobiographical genre. The penultimate sentence, '*However, I am anticipating*', is an explicit venture into a side commentary by the narrator, on the remembering process itself and the way in which he feels it should be disciplined into a strictly chronological sequence. The effect takes the style into a more spoken intimate story-telling style that relaxes the tone and promises an interweaving of the past and the present as Nevinson reviews his life. This narrative device does however compromise the reader's assumption that events can be recalled in a way that tidily and sequentially conjure up the past without authorial asides that add little to the overall narrative structure.

Having positioned this book as a conversational autobiography it now becomes pertinent to explore its recollections of the pre-War years more precisely so as to be able to note the status and value Nevinson attaches to pre-War modernism itself within the autobiographical context he constructed. However its strong emphasis on who met whom and what was said as groups and exhibitions came and went and commissions were won or lost overwhelms Nevinson's story. There is so much social bustle featuring the impresarios and critics and detailed accounts of exhibition intrigue to recollect that an appraisal of the art itself is overlooked. A reader in 1937 is left with a strong impression of a *melée* of painters searching for recognition and career progression in an exhibiting environment that had little order or vision. This is not a narrative which can give sustenance to any idea that something notable and important happened in England before the War, and as such it corroborates and strengthens the paradigm of mediocrity and false starts of the English modernism project. This critical and historical weakness, although expressed in an autobiography that is, by definition, tolerant of personal bias raises a broader

question about the shaping of history that these texts bring about. Nevinson is one of several writers, including Lewis, who wished to position their early careers in a way that distanced their current maturity at the time of writing from the years of youthful experimentation – an evaluation that perhaps has more to do with a desire to emphasise career progression and personal enlightenment rather than an outright denial of early promise.

Wyndham Lewis is a problematic force to account for in this historiography in that his writing and influence cannot adequately be appraised given its breadth and depth. His important phase as a regular contributor to *The Listener* during the 1940s will be referred to in the next chapter. However the 1930s need to be noted as a period when Lewis returned to painting, the results of which would eventually be shown at the exhibition at *The Leicester Galleries* in 1937, however Lewis distanced himself from the younger generation active through *Unit One* or *Axis*. His professional demeanour as a painter had no revolutionary credentials to prove at this stage. There is a parallel distance, which Lewis acknowledges in his art-writing too, when he enters a phase of looking back on the turbulent productivity of the pre-War years and explores its current reputation. The published vehicles of this reflective period in Lewis' prolific output that stand out are his autobiography of 1937, '*Blasting and Bombardiering*'⁹⁰ considered above, and two lesser-known essays that were included in a re-printed version of his earlier writing and which were written to introduce '*Wyndham Lewis the Artist*' (1939)⁹¹. The two essays; '*Super-Nature Versus Super-Real*' and '*The Skeleton in The Cupboard Speaks*' are rarely-

⁹⁰ Lewis, W. 1937.

⁹¹ Lewis W. *Wyndham Lewis the Artist, from 'Blast' to Burlington House*. London: Laidlaw and Laidlaw, 1939.

Following the two above-mentioned essays the book reprints '*The Caliph's Design*', most of Lewis' writing on art from *Blast* and *The Tyro* and letters to *The Times* concerning his portrait of T.S.Eliot which had been rejected by The Royal Academy in 1938.

cited complementary pieces which when read together form the retrospective position that Lewis is offering at this precarious point; precarious both in terms of World events, but also in terms of the barren state of painting and the art market at this time. His denunciation of the '*super-real*' in the first essay, (the standard translation of *surrealisme* at this time) is unequivocal, calling it an '*anti-movement*'.⁹²

*...surrealism(sic) is not the last of a new movement, but the whimsical and grimacing reinstatement of the old – and of the bad old at that, the 'academic'.*⁹³

The argument Lewis develops in this essay is clearly likely to prompt hindsight and recollections of a previous period refracted through the outrage he feels in 1939. Historiographically it can be commented on at this point that Lewis appears not to feel the tension that many historians are subject to as they, on the one hand attempt to immerse and substantiate their assertions firmly within another reality (of the past), whilst on the other, acknowledge that this is an impossible task, and knowingly submit to the filter of their current awareness and historical location. Lewis is a cavalier chronicler in this regard but his honest energy and self-belief never attempts to conceal from the reader that looking back elicits a new perspective. He seems to delight unguardedly in the shifts of history, and the shifts in his own intellectual interpretation of events.

Lewis' emphasises his relationship to the early writing reprinted in this book, and the art of the pre-War years, saying that it springs from a totally different era.

*Modern art, of the highly experimental sort advocated in these essays and manifestos, is at an end. It is all over except for the shouting.*⁹⁴

⁹² As reprinted in Michel, W. and Fox, C.J., *Wyndham Lewis on Art – Collected Writings 1913-1956*; London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969.p307.

⁹³ *ibid.* p. 307

Lewis builds the doctrine that in 1939 a return to realism is now the only course to maintain artistic integrity. However, the achievements of the revolutionary movement with which he was associated before the War are subtly supported in terms of their lasting impact. However, in Lewis' view it is only a glimmer of historical permanence and importance.

Brief as was its reign, its works will stand there behind us to obstruct too abject a return to past successes. It is a snag in the path of those who would sneak back to Impressionism. Some of its vigour will remain, and inform the phases of the great withdrawal that is everywhere taking place, and at least prevent the retreat from developing into a rout.⁹⁵

This first essay is also notable for its rumbling antipathy towards the enthusiasms of Herbert Read for the younger generation of experimental artists. Lewis mixes respect for, and ridicule of Read to spice his commentary on the weaknesses of the current fashions in contemporary art.

Under these circumstances, to correlate Mr. Read's many utterances is not unlike attempting to establish a common factor of eclectic inspiration in the rapid succession of 'models' emanating from some ultra-fashionable Parisian dressmaker Yet there is something essentially Read. This man has a core to him, ... And that central impulse leads him to the sensational and sentimental quarter of the philosophic compass.⁹⁶

Lewis also tries to separate Read's talent as a writer from the dearth of quality in contemporary painting, demonstrating an irony whereby it is possible for able critics to be badly served by their subject.

... Mr Herbert Read is acquiring an agreeable reputation by writing about something that does not exist, except for a handful of monied dilettantes, amusing themselves by being childish in public.⁹⁷

Of central interest are the direct estimations Lewis provides as to the brief flowering of Vorticism before the War which are chiefly articulated in the second essay, 'The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks'. Lewis heads off any possible

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 306

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 309

⁹⁶ Ibid. p.311

⁹⁷ Ibid. p.321

accusations of blind inconsistency in his opinions by confessing to a “*dual personality ... 'Revolutionary' and 'Traditionalist'.*”⁹⁸

The tone and basis of the whole essay is a witty treatment on the idea of Lewis as almost a voice from the grave, a skeleton, now releasing these highly personal reflections on his role in recent art history. His argument positions Vorticism as the only radical movement calling it ‘*unadulterated extremism*’⁹⁹, a collocation replete with ambiguity as to its intrinsic merit. Lewis is also happy to contain its efforts to ‘*...a year or two, no more.*’¹⁰⁰

More positively in 1939 he now gives it relative importance internationally which is a deviation from the standard narrative that, at best, placed it as a domestic imitation of Cubism and Futurism.

*... but in such works as had begun to spring forth fully armed from the iron brains of a handful of adherents, it showed itself more resolute in its exclusion of the past than the Paris School, less concerned with the jazzed-up spectacle of the megalopolis than the Italians, and much more distinct from architecture than the Dutch (such as Mondrian).*¹⁰¹

A central argument in Lewis' essay concerns the time lag that English artists were typically accused of. He expands on the well-rehearsed notion that ideas and innovation came late to England, giving it his particular intellectual bite and wit – and of course thereby further entrenching this seeming truism in the historiography. He also wants to clarify what he sees as reductive analysis of Vorticism that celebrated its relationship to the machine age with little depth. Rather, with considerable lyricism, Lewis expounds on his belief that Vorticism did not

⁹⁸ Ibid. p.339

⁹⁹ Ibid. p.334

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.334

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. 339

*...sentimentalise machines – as did the Italians; it took them as a matter of course: just as we take trees, hills, rivers, coal deposits, oil wells, rubber trees as matter of course.*¹⁰²

Lewis elaborates further on his differentiation of Vorticism from Futurism, making distinctions that are fresh and authentic - thirty years after the event.

Alluding to the Futurist objective to capture movement Lewis says,

For to represent a machine in violent movement is to arrive at a blur, or a kaleidoscope. And a blur was as abhorrent to a vorticist as a vacuum is to nature.

*A machine in violent motion ceases to look like a machine. It looks perhaps, like a rose, or like a sponge.... So the very spirit of the machine is lost – the hard, the cold, the mechanical and the static. And it was those attributes for which Vorticism had a particular partiality.*¹⁰³

This is Lewis as memoirist putting the record straight and refreshingly willing to focus on the painting itself.

Lewis then tackles the default critical position concerning the hegemony and supremacy of France. Again his thoughts are more probing and nuanced than the standard tropes of English weakness in the face of French strength. It is an important argument in the historiography in that it is unusual and atypical, and of course testifies to Lewis' originality and his willingness to be iconoclastic in his historical analysis.

Paris has its function; but it is that of an art school, nothing more. A finishing school let us call it. I myself am Paris-finished.

...All the French have to teach us is technical matters. In receiving at their hands a technical instruction, we should at all times be careful not to absorb along with that a spirit that is not our affair.,

What has been called the 'Cézannean revolution' was conducted by immigrant Catalans.

Lewis' anti-French peroration comes to a climax in the deployment of a belligerent analogy that in 1939 would have had a painful resonance.

¹⁰² Ibid. p.341

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 341

*In the light of their artistic output the Italians appear to us as a nation of heavyweights: ... the French as a nation of lightweights. The British are in the 'cruiser' class: but ideologically, inclined to aspire to the Flyweight class.*¹⁰⁴

It is perhaps entirely to be expected that the biography that Virginia Woolf wrote of Roger Fry, prepared over some years after his death in 1934, and published in 1940, takes the genre to a high level of mastery and sensitivity in terms of content and its form. Added to this competence is Woolf's deep and personal knowledge of the subject which places it as an account that belongs with other biographies that have this special authoritative basis. However, there are caveats that spring from this fact that have to do with the challenge of ensuring some measure of objectivity, and the likelihood that the deeply factionalised world the 'Bloomberries' inhabited would result in creative compromises and biased judgement on her part. The over-riding factor though that impinges on any critique of this biography is Woolf's fame and reputation as a pre-eminent modernist novelist which affords a particular critical aura to this biography. At the most basic level it has sold thousands of copies and is still in print today. At a more rarefied level Woolf's every word is examined critically and by numerous scholars and general readers. Thus her views on Fry and the primary sources she draws on have entered an arena beyond that which other accounts of this time would have achieved. It can therefore be argued that her authorship has propelled this particular account into a close and direct relationship with the more mainstream art history publications, and thus has become a major tributary of the narrative under scrutiny by sheer virtue of Woolf's fame and acclaim.

Fry's pre-War predilection for French art is rehearsed repeatedly by Woolf as she recounts the excitements of the Grafton exhibitions in 1910-11 and 1912.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 344

She gives huge emphasis to the negative reception of the new art by the general public which concurs with Fry's own outrage and disappointment at the time. She describes these events that were happening in an environment that wouldn't otherwise have fostered radical experiment. Woolf doesn't build any narrative suspense or dramatic irony to make her point as to this hostile situation as she immediately leaps to the present day to remind the reader that, *'It would need to-day as much moral courage to denounce Cézanne, Picasso, Seurat, Van Gogh and Gauguin as it needed then to defend them'*¹⁰⁵ eloquently allowing the past and present to be contrasted through her privileged position as omniscient narrator.

Woolf then rehearses the by-now familiar view that English artists were profoundly influenced by what they had seen in these exhibitions quoting William Rothenstein's autobiographical writing¹⁰⁶ to substantiate her point. This view is perhaps the dominant mantra within the story of English modernism and to some extent it is given a huge new impetus through Woolf's clear support for its veracity, despite many extant references to English artists' experiences in Paris before 1910.

The biographical story then proceeds to emphasise Fry's view that Post-Impressionism represented continuity and not artistic rupture from all that had gone before. Woolf also gives full measure to an account of Fry's despair at the lack of English interest in modern art. As has been seen throughout, emphasis on this kind of Philistinism is typical of so much of the commentary on the reception of modern art in England to the point where even Woolf, despite her

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, V. *Roger Fry – a biography*, London: Vintage 2003; p.159. (First printed in England by The Hogarth Press, 1940.)

¹⁰⁶ Rothenstein, W. *Men and Memories, recollections etc (Vol. 3 Since Fifty)* London: Faber and Faber, 1931-9

clear evidence for the justification of recounting this, is nevertheless adding to the unshakeable belief that modern art is misunderstood and negatively received regardless of its quality. It may also be argued that in general this unrelenting reception emphasis effectively occupies the critical space that could have been granted to the consideration of the painting itself, although that would be hard to argue for in this case which aims to faithfully recount Roger Fry's preoccupation with the lamentable gallery-going public before the War.

Woolf's narrative of Fry's other heroic struggle against the art establishment who resisted support for new art is captured in her long explanation of Fry's altercation with William Rothenstein over the second Grafton Galleries exhibition that was being specifically designed to place English art alongside continental exponents of the modern idioms. The conservative forces Fry wanted to enlist in this project were reluctant and it fell to Rothenstein to offer his side of the story in his own memoirs from which Woolf provides quotations. The reporting of this incident in Fry's biography again adds fuel to the standard narrative that not only was the general public beyond redemption, so also were the knowledgeable and powerful members of the art establishment who thwarted Fry's efforts.

She wrote sensitively of her feeling towards Fry as the project neared publication and reflected in her diary entry of 25th July 1940,

What a curious relation is mine with Roger at the moment – I who have give him a kind of shape after his death – Was he like that? I feel very much in his presence at the moment: as if I was intimately connected with him; as if together we had given birth to this vision of him: a child born of us. Yet he had no power to alter it. And yet for some years it will represent him.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Bell, Olivier, (ed.) *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5 1936-1941*, New York: Mariner Books, 1985 p.289

This awareness of the biographical process and its power to '*represent*' signals a knowingness in Woolf that her words would have lasting influence, and perhaps, it could be extrapolated, this impact would indeed intensify standard historical accounts of early twentieth century art in England.

The book's critical reception tells much of the moment at which it was launched. Reaction was slow in coming but it eventually engaged the art historical experts; Desmond MacCarthy wrote a kind review in *The Sunday Times*, and Herbert Read praised her work but heavily criticised Fry's elitism suggesting he existed in a '*private world of his own sensibility*'¹⁰⁸, not a recommendation to those who expected this biography of Fry to reveal the true nature of the pre-War art scene. Fry's early formalist theories despite their later qualification, together with his association with the privileged and intellectual Bloomsbury group, had become a victim of the materialist art historical perspective that Read and others had successfully propounded throughout the decade.

The three books which complete this survey of the 1930s are complementary in that they can be differentiated as to their style, audience and emphasis, however all are derived from experience, expertise and understanding setting them apart as serious measured efforts to apportion merit and contextualise modern art in the first half of the twentieth century. Mary Chamot's '*Modern Painting in England*' (1937) clearly demarcates her book on national lines, while Charles Marriott's, '*A Key to Modern Painting*' (1938) continues the tradition of looking at modern art broadly and theoretically and his examination of the early

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Majumbar, R. McLaurin, A.(eds), *Virginia Woolf – The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge and Kegan 1975, p. 425

English exponents is fitted into this didactic model in a manner that reiterates the modesty of their contribution, thus perpetuating the dominant view that English modernists lacked the raw vigour of their Continental counterparts. Frank Rutter, another veteran commentator, re-visits his views in '*Modern Masterpieces*' not published until 1940, but written (probably) in 1936, the year before his death. It is a glossy publication with many illustrations and the story of the English lineage of modern art is given prominence and it is assertively set alongside Continental modern art with some estimations of equivalence and appreciation of an English culturally-specific body of modern painting. It can be said that Rutter's and Marriott's histories represent a continuation of their clear positions on modern art but by this time, in the late thirties, their views and assessments are being polished and consolidated and fully digested into a historical account to the point where these two books stand as their final word on the matter.

It can be tentatively posited that subdued market forces in the publishing industry and perhaps also that professional territorial niceties were in play which ensured that duplication was avoided so that each writer occupied a niche position at this juncture. This therefore can be seen as a moment when a historical narrative matured and the paradigm was adapted to embrace the centre ground of views concerning this period and that the extremes of vilification had become critically outmoded. Further to this evolution of the narrative when considered as a group these three books comprise the point the core historical narrative had reached after being processed through the filter of the second strong wave of modernism, and the absorption of the autobiographical testimonies of those who had broadcast their first-hand accounts of the pre-war years of experimentation.

Mary Chamot's book was a particularly pioneering effort of the new context that has influenced English art history of the twentieth century since. She gained the co-operation of many practising artists to ensure its accuracy and it was well-received critically. She made the bold decision to tackle the nay-sayers of English modern art head-on from the outset as if to clear the ground of its more excitable detractors. Her short prefatory remarks acknowledge the discursive complications caused by French dominance, and her mitigating answer to this takes this book firmly towards the accommodating trope of national specificity. From the outset the relativism is skilfully neutralised through moderate and subliminal appeals to readers' national pride, which at the same time announces the book's methodology.

*It is not claimed that England has produced anything as important as France in the last century, but our painting does reflect English life and English taste, and for that reason deserves to be treated consistently as a whole.*¹⁰⁹

Chamot thus prepares her readers well and cleverly appeals to a sense of shared interests through the beguiling use of 'our' to secure the reader's involvement. There is also an implied criticism of writing that has gone before that she perhaps regards as *inconsistent*, so from the outset there is a declared and confident intent to somehow put the record straight .

The chapter headings Chamot devises to structure her book depart from the book's title which warrants comment. The '*Modern Painting*' of the title becomes commuted to other descriptors to classify the styles and stages of she wishes to critically address. Clearly the designation '*modern*' is intended to operate as a generic label confined to the title so that she can develop an inclusive and flexible survey. The radical modern art that this research addresses is covered

¹⁰⁹ Chamot, M. *Modern Painting in England*, London, Country Life Ltd. New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1937 p.5.

in only two chapters which announce their content with critical restraint, although her categories are still beholden to the difficult task of corralling the diversity of art practice during these years, the fourth chapter being '*The London Group, Post-Impressionist Painting from Sickert to Fry*' and the sixth chapter being titled, '*The Influence of the War, Abstract and Imaginative Painting*'. They are separated by a chapter on English portraiture chiefly covering Orpen and John. This nomenclature and the sequencing are revealing; clearly Chamot is making an informed and deliberate case for an integrated and broadly-based approach to modern art. Chamot's authority to assert this proposal is just, as her credentials as a respected curator and scholar at the Tate gallery ensure that this view would have been arrived at on the basis of scholarly knowledge and understanding.

Chamot's introduction takes a long and wide view of the shift that modern art signifies, establishing at the outset an articulate summary of its personal, expressive and non-representational impulses. She encourages her readers, who may be sceptical, by citing the risks and reverses suffered by Rembrandt in a previous era. However within a few short paragraphs she cuts to the chase.

*Unfortunately it is a commonplace that an Englishman only admires art when it is foreign. Consequently, English painting of the last half-century has been unduly neglected. It must be admitted that the English school has not produced any outstanding genius of world-wide importance, and that more spectacular movements and personalities have appeared abroad; but the period has been fertile in other ways. In spite of the overbearing influence of modern French art all over the world, English painters have succeeded in preserving their national temper, and a kinship with earlier English art can be felt even when modern forms of expression are used.'*¹¹⁰

A fuller critique of just this paragraph would be able to open up many of the issues that are pertinent to England's encounter with, and response to,

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* p.16

modernity, as well as the roots of the personal regret she expresses. It is plain however, that in celebrating French art as the pinnacle of transgressive creativity, she feels a domestic inadequacy had been exacerbated. Her descriptor of French art as having '*overbearing influence*' indirectly reveals an objective to qualify this effect as undue, and also that she sees this as a discursive trope not fully substantiated by the facts, thus this paragraph's meaning provides a significant historiographical point of interest. She suggests that two factors have suppressed the interest in and esteem of English art. The '*neglect*' she speaks of is ambiguous. It is possible though, to legitimately construe, given the historiography examined in this research that Chamot, is in fact negatively commenting on the quality and quantity of history and criticism as it relates to recent modern art. The '*over-bearing influence of modern French art all over the world*' is also a thought that suggests other national traditions have been over-shadowed too, another opaque but notable aside in her text.

These introductory remarks are very much framed by the continuity argument as she knowledgeably ranges across the history of art in order to understand and make causal links to the present era. She is specific about this with respect to England, saying that in the last fifty years , '*a steady evolution can be traced among the painters*'¹¹¹ – '*steady*' being a term perhaps intended to appease conservative readers but also having enough negative connotations to send a signal to those who saw that steadiness as the problem. Chamot's selection of '*evolution*' resonates with concepts of inexorable forward progress and teleological determinism and well illustrates that her professionally crafted point of view arises from this most embedded of tropes within art historical discourse.

¹¹¹ *ibid.* p.17

Chapter IV, which deals with English Post-Impressionism, is perhaps most striking for the priority Chamot gives to describing and interpreting individual paintings and summing up their qualities and effects. In historiographical terms the specific comments are notable for the fact that these descriptions and evaluations are the driving force and energy of her narrative. This perspective is a new and authentic way to communicate to the reader an analysis of English modern art. The many colour and black and white reproductions also enhance this visually descriptive text.

Chamot takes great care to pay due respect to Roger Fry's contribution to the promotion and understanding of modern art although her views on his painting are direct. '*Most of his paintings look laboured*'¹¹² - rehearsing again the long-established consensus that he was less a painter than a writer, an assessment that saddened him throughout his life. Chamot then considers Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell and praises their pre-War work as well as their recent projects in an informed and detailed way. She takes issue though with Clive Bell's estimation that they are the *only* painters who "*conformed to his ideals and produce 'significant form'*"¹¹³.

This chapter also gives careful attention to the Camden Town painters and their reputation as colourists and provides anecdotal evidence of their dedication and contribution to the Post-Impressionist style. Once again she dwells on actual paintings and understandably these are usually examples from the Tate's collection.

The chapter entitled '*The Influence of the War*' addresses Vorticism but not before rehearsing the endemic view that in general, some art movements are

¹¹² *ibid.* p.47

¹¹³ *ibid.* p.48

capable of '*fore-shadowing world events*'¹¹⁴ initially proposing a similarity with French classicism prior to the Revolution. However, as is the norm when this argument is presented, the turmoil of modernity itself is also invoked to explain Cubism and Vorticism as well as the notion of being a premonition of the Great War. Chamot contextualises the English Vorticists by referring to Cézanne, Picasso and the Futurists. She pays special attention to their Rebel Art Centre and the two issues of the avant-garde magazine '*Blast*' – an emphasis on the written material of this movement that recurs consistently in many accounts. '*Blast*'s' undoubted originality and arresting rhetoric seems to galvanise and pre-occupy the historical debate; a pre-occupation that can be granted many explanations. The fact that many Vorticist paintings of this period are lost whereas *Blast* lived, (and lives) on in many facsimiles may be part of the explanation. This may be coupled with the literary leanings in the art historical fraternity that continually recognised its innovation and boldness. Chamot then goes on to consider the painting of Lewis, Etchells, Roberts, and Nevinson and her overall analysis that '*It was an art of simplification rather than abstraction*'¹¹⁵ which is an example of her ability to capture an analytical essence and communicate it with great precision.

This chapter demonstrates the phenomenon already noted as to the partial erasure of the history of pre-War art as it rehearses the well-established proposition that its chief contribution, especially evidenced by Vorticism, had been to fore-tell the global conflict and to inaugurate a visual style that would only become mature when fully-realised War art was produced. Chamot maintains this narrative precept as she gives extended attention to the War

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* p.65

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* p.66

painting of Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer she moves swiftly towards the 1930s.

In common with most of the serious publications within this art historical genre it is the opening paragraphs of each chapter that most clearly illuminate the broad way in which modern art was being given its place within the overall historical narrative. Mary Chamot is no exception, although her focus on the painting itself is a notable feature of her writing and this lends it a refreshing authority. The chapter '*English Portraiture*' follows this template, but is also interesting for its nuanced understanding of an English-specific response to modernity that Chamot detected in the return to classical principles, particularly in the work of Orpen, Pryde, Augustus John, and William Nicholson. Chamot argues cogently for an appreciation of their work that includes their responses to the modern era through their attention to '*the substance of things rather than their appearance, as the Impressionists (had been.)*'¹¹⁶ This is an inclusive analysis that amounts to a significant new subtlety in the discourse, perhaps heralding at an early juncture the revisionism of recent years.

As referred to above, Mary Chamot engaged in much preparatory correspondence with those who had memories and detail to offer from the past, particularly as she set about compiling the biographical appendix. Ben Nicholson was even sent a proof copy which he responded to in detail to ensure his former wife's work, (Winifred Nicholson) and his own were differentiated appropriately. Many artists who were to be mentioned were understandably keen that she reported their work and biographies accurately and some took the trouble to offer their views on how the history of this period had been recorded. A letter from David Bomberg written to Mary Chamot on 5th May 1937 illustrates how

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* p.51.

these interactions fed into the writing process but its chief interest for this research lies in its comments, from an important artist of the pre-War years, about the written narrative that had developed.

Though many books have been written on modern painting in England they have all lacked the desire to include me, except in one or two instances before nineteen twenty. - Since you have this distinction of showing a desire to include me in you forth-coming book I am herewith sending you material which supports my view (as explained on the telephone to you this morning) that in any book which includes me I should be accorded the degree of recognition I am entitled to for my contribution to contemporary painting, and it is on this ground therefore that I must insist that if I appear in your book it must be with a reproduction of at least one photograph of a painting and of a text that will give a true perspective of myself as a contemporary painter.

It is unfortunate that an artist has to write like this, but the fault is not mine, rather it lies with the false estimation that contemporary so-called(?) journalism , in conjunction with the general degradation of the artistic critique combined with the fact that the exhibiting and marketing is in the hands of people who have no real sensitivity to art, more in the way traders clutch at any commodity, any and every straw to make a financial profit during a period of decline and disintegration.¹¹⁷

Clearly the egotism and personal grievances of Bomberg are in evidence but his regrets as to the quality of recent art writing have veracity and substance. He also has a clear belief that Mary Chamot is perhaps the person who can mitigate the situation. Bomberg's cynicism as to the mercenary motives and crude ignorance of those who tasked themselves with art's reception is heartfelt, illustrating how a partial breakdown in trust had soured artists' respect for dealers, galleries and critics.

A review of Duncan Grant's exhibition at Agnew's Gallery in November 1937 obliquely corroborates and extends the scope of this critical malaise. The decorations for The Queen Mary liner that this exhibition showed are fulsomely

¹¹⁷ TGA 7135,878/4/3

praised but the anonymous reviewer hints at the way this exhibition, through its very existence, has emphasised a sorry lack of critical appreciation.

That is why he alone of the English Franco-philes could be expected to tackle a problem like the Queen Mary panels with success. Why, having designed these panels, Mr Grant should now be exhibiting them is a mystery whose answer reflects no credit on English taste.¹¹⁸

Charles Marriott's '*A Key to Modern Painting*'¹¹⁹ opens with a full exposition of the intense need for a treatise on art and its relationship to modern society. He elaborates on such questions as, '*the Arts and their mediums*' (chapter iv) and '*Art and Science*' (chapter vii) before he moves to analysis of Seurat and Cézanne. What is most curious about Marriott's book is his sudden shift to dichotomising twentieth century art into '*the central tradition*' that occupies him for three chapters, and '*borderland developments*' which separately address '*Expressionism*' '*Abstraction*' and '*Surrealism*'. This conceptual framework of core and margin has an in-built assumption of seeing avant-garde modern art as a fringe activity, a spatial metaphor that had not been deployed hitherto. '*The Central Tradition*' is where Marriott positions English Post-Impressionism and he duly praises Gore, Gilman and Ginner although his characterisation of their work is stark.

Gore was the poet of the three, Gilman the blunt John Bull, and Ginner has developed an interesting style in which an unobtrusively decorative design and the subtlest relationships of intensifies colour are associated with an almost literal fidelity to the facts of appearance.¹²⁰

In his paragraph referring to Grant and Vanessa Bell he suggests that, '*The 'key to them is their temperaments and not in aesthetic theory*'. This seems to be a

¹¹⁸ *The Guardian* November 9th, 1937. p.12

¹¹⁹ Marriott, C. *A Key to Modern Painting*, London and Glasgow: Blackie and Son Ltd. 1938.

¹²⁰ *ibid.* p.118

denigrating comment but he does concede that they have talent, albeit derived from Cézanne, which firmly invests in the narrative orthodoxy yet again.

*Duncan Grant, with his gift, owing something to the example of Cézanne, for constructing a composition, whether realistic or decorative, in full tones of colour applied; and Vanessa Bell who, with a more subtle sense of colour, gives feminine expression to a similar gift.*¹²¹

The category of 'borderland' is explored with barely any mention of English artists. It is in the chapters entitled 'Adjustments', and even more loosely 'Painters and Others' that Marriott offers his somewhat up-dated and forthright view of the radical modern art that emerged in England and it is in this chapter that Vorticism features. The linkage he makes with Futurism is boldly stated and the political connection to Fascism in Italy has clearly, by the time he writes in 1938, become a topic to be wary of when supporting or celebrating this movement in any way. Marriott, as a result of this finds little to say of these movements and retreats into a long critique of Lewis' attempts to verbalise the essence of his aesthetic philosophy. Unlike Mary Chamot this author has no commentary to offer on any of the paintings and this is a book which offers a lesser achievement than Chamot's well-substantiated arguments. Marriott's somewhat under-developed expositions of aesthetic theory are put into dialogue with his fuller and more fluent reiteration of the standard narrative of twentieth century art, so that this overview more than adequately reflects received opinion at this stage.

In contrast, Frank Rutter's '*Modern Masterpieces*' has the hallmarks of an authoritative and more mature historical account strengthened by its wealth of illustrations and expensive format. The structure however is unadventurous and plainly announced as it offers twenty-five chapters that proceed from Turner to Surrealism with a clear demarcation of English art, which is thus given prominence rather than being buried in excessive homage to Continental modernism. This at

¹²¹ *ibid.* p.135.

once communicates to the reader that a history of modern art published in England can be allowed the privilege of a domestic focus without compromise. Rutter's chosen structure is a safe, (in historiographical terms), conflation of accounts of artist groupings, individual biographies and short but astute descriptions of individual paintings. Vorticism, as was by now the norm, finds its historical home in the company of *'Picasso and the Cubists'* and Rutter succinctly refers to it as *'a native form of Cubism'*¹²² and the manifesto *'Blas'* receives initial attention in order to introduce Lewis' role as leader and *'fountain of inspiration'* to Wadsworth, Etchells and Roberts. Immediately following this the narrative declares its position in the larger historical current by referring back and quoting Marriott's view in 1920 in *'Modern Movements in Painting'* This is one of the first occasions on which the trajectory of history-writing of this period cross-refers in this manner which thereby arguably takes the historical narrative to a new level of maturity.

Rutter then announces his own estimation of Vorticism, a view that gives a firm and somewhat negatively-expressed qualification as to its lasting importance that is couched firmly in the past tense.

*But Vorticism could not lead anywhere. Wadsworth and Roberts have long ago left its tenets behind in the natural development of their own original art, and Lewis himself openly avowed its limitations in his pronouncement made just after the Great War. ... Vorticism left its mark, however, upon the art and literature of its time, and not the least important result of its stimulating influence, outside of easel-painting, is the improvement in poster design which has been so evident of recent times.*¹²³

This critique succinctly foreshadows the consensus that enters the art historical arena after the Second World War.

Rutter also deals with English post-Impressionists in a way that gives minimal

¹²² Rutter, F. 1940. p.220

¹²³ *ibid.* p.222.

attention to the 1910-15 period. It is addressed in the chapter on '*Art in London after the Great War*' and therefore the commentary and analysis can only treat this phase with oblique retrospection. In passing Rutter relegates Grant considerably, calling him '*... an uncertain and unequal painter*'.¹²⁴ The old rivalries and differences between Clive Bell and Frank Rutter too are clearly still in evidence.

Mr. Clive Bell and others have gone so far as to call Duncan Grant 'England's greatest painter', a title of distinction to which he has no claim whatsoever while so many of his more richly gifted seniors remain alive.
125

Rutter's view of Vanessa Bell is similarly tepid, for the same reason; her early work is only remarked on for its contribution to '*decorative work done at the Omega workshop*'.¹²⁶

The overall disparaging tone of these quotations pinpoints a gradually accentuating strand in the wider narrative beyond this publication. From this point the Bloomsbury painters enter an extended phase where their pre-Great War efforts are significantly down-played and, when mentioned at all, are characterised as tentative and limited.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this chapter that by about 1935 a more distanced, and articulate sense of history shaped the art-writing that addressed the pre World War 1 years. Until then the debates concerning art movements, tendencies and the worth of individual artists had been in some disarray. The seemingly

¹²⁴ *ibid.* p. 251

¹²⁵ *ibid.* p.251

¹²⁶ *ibid.* p. 252

unstoppable imperative to position this period of domestic art in relation to its Continental counterparts had also inhibited progress towards a mature narrative. Until the 1930s pre-War experimentation was also explicitly considered to be too recent to evaluate.

At the beginning of the decade the vested interests of the art scene, who were the chief animators of the narrative, fell short of the challenge to position pre-War modern art with historical dexterity and reasoned judgements, typically perpetuating the clichéd tropes that had been the foremost critical tools during the 1920s. These inchoate efforts also effectively shrank in discursive presence within the wider art historical environment as longer, more reassuring historical perspectives were deemed more appropriate to the unstable political and economic circumstances.

After 1935, as published art history developed and grew, a niche expanded which could demonstrate more scholarly authority, but one which also offered lay appeal and so writers found a way to speak of pre-War modern art that had the hallmarks of a maturing narrative. In other words, although the building blocks of the narrative had been previously discernible, they had now matured into a more sophisticated discursive mode and could be tested for their on-going worth.

Having now reached a stage where the critical reception literature in the years prior to both Wars is in view, a clear point, almost invisible in its obviousness, can nevertheless be remarked upon. At both these moments of crisis continuation of debates and analytical norms were clearly untenable and changes in the discourse were duly precipitated. National loyalties and patriotic priorities overwhelmed the critics in 1939 as they had in 1914. By the time the special edition of *The Studio* on British Art in October 1940 was published its

editor, Geoffrey Holme, titled his editorial '*Britain Undaunted*' and the principal article by Graham Bell was called, '*Art in the Island Fortress*'. Within the extreme stress of 1940 Bell was only able to recall and identify Sickert as '*England's greatest living artist*'¹²⁷, only qualified by the respect also given to Augustus John. It is clear Bell felt compelled to construct a positive and inspiring survey for his beleaguered readers.

Throughout the 1930s historians and critics had reached a stage of what Hayden White has called a '*sense-making*' of the real events that took place twenty five years previously. White theorises that it is the writer's task to propose '*the possible story form*' to his readers.

*In his narrative account of how this set (any set) of events took on the shape which he perceives to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind. The reader, in the process of following the historian's account of those events, gradually comes to realise that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, epic, or what have you.*¹²⁸

It becomes increasingly clear that the writers of the 1930s looked in the main for the development of their narrative to the disappointments inherent in White's tragic category as they positioned and reiterated the lost opportunities and momentum of pre-War artists who had struggled against circumstance, cultural resistance to their efforts and their own short-comings as artists. Heroic individuals were esteemed and noted for their battles against the cultural grain and were duly lauded and canonised but theirs was principally a story of struggle against the odds in a hostile or unaccommodating environment. The critics developed this fictive shape in their histories and memoirs, and this was highly dependent on a limited tropical repertoire, that this research has now identified, and which will be carried forward for consideration in the concluding

¹²⁷ Bell, G. 'Art in the Island Fortress', in *The Studio*, October 1940.p.100

¹²⁸ White, H. Historical Text as Literary Artifact, essay in White, H. *Tropics of Discourse, essays in cultural criticism*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985 p86

chapter which assesses the features of the discourse in its second encounter with World War and the traumas of its aftermath.

Chapter Five

Forty Years On

Introduction

Sir John Rothenstein writes with the conviction that modern English painting is seriously undervalued abroad and even at home, yet he makes no extravagant claims on its behalf. His critical opinions, always independent and often unfashionable, may not command general agreement, but the book contains much information indispensable to art students, and likely to prove of interest to a wide public.

[From the dust jacket of the first edition of the second volume of, '*Modern English Painters, Lewis to Moore*'- 1956]

The first volume of John Rothenstein's major series, '*Modern English Painters*', published in 1952, represents a return to the debate on early modern domestic art after the partial hiatus of the Second World War. This kind of serious and extended survey had not been attempted since Mary Chamot's book of 1937, which had approached the subject with the calm authority of a professional curator and historian. In contrast Rothenstein's series, also produced from a position of influence in The Tate Gallery, returned to the issues of domestic modern art with passion and verve, and a measure of controversy. It can be argued that the energy expended by Rothenstein in his attempt to range widely and fully effectively subdued any further major efforts during the post-War decade to write a history of the previous forty years. Therefore, in line with the parameters outlined in chapter one of this thesis, volumes one (1952), and two

(1956) of Rothenstein's series comprise the historiographical milestone with which to mark the outer boundary of this research. It will be argued in this chapter that despite the notoriety and wide dissemination of Rothenstein's landmark project there are opportunities to challenge its inherent quality and new ways to analyse its structure and content. This close critique will be preceded by consideration of other lesser accounts of the early modernists published both during and immediately after the Second World War.

Rothenstein's contribution to the narrative at this juncture came at a time when public interest in the art of Bloomsbury painters had waned significantly although the intrigue and scandals of their unconventional lifestyles had continued to be publicly examined at regular intervals. However, exhibitions and acquisitions of their work had been sparse.¹ Lewis' presence in the cultural environment had also waned after his writing in *The Listener* had to be curtailed in 1951 as his blindness became total. There was also a new displacing energy and vigour in the London art community as the precursors of Pop Art originated a new and mischievous relationship to the excitements of post-War technologies. Thus there was, in a sense, a timely opportunity for critical reflection as England finally showed it had recovered from the privations of War. This created a summative niche for Rothenstein's intervention as this conjunction of a bounded past and a vibrant present firmly punctuated the story of domestic art history.

Also of interest in this post-War period was the publication in 1951 of Herbert Read's, '*Contemporary British Art*', a slim volume but nevertheless representative of the mainstream thinking on twentieth-century art at this point.

¹ See Spalding, F. *Duncan Grant*, London: Pimlico 1998, chapter 24.

Read seems to be offering a narrow survey of the contemporary art world, but as is often the convention in histories of the contemporary scene, his introductory essay provides context and opinion over a longer timescale. The historical perspective offered by Read in the first edition of 1951 was significantly curtailed in the 1964 edition, providing further evidence of a specific and historically-aware juncture in the immediate post-War years that prompted a lengthy digression into the origins and specificities of British art. William Gaunt's history, '*The March of the Moderns*', published in 1949, will also be examined as representative of a synthetic historical style that brings together the accessibility of an anecdotal account with a clear aspiration to theorise in a more scholarly register.

Further to the interventions of Rothenstein, Read and Gaunt, input into the critical discourse by artists themselves also continued to introduce a special form of authenticity that is both enriching and engaging, although this strand inevitably faded in the 1950s as many of the surviving pre-World War One artists died. Lewis continued to be one of these especially authoritative commentators, arguably the most active and influential at this time. Lewis' writing, during and after the second War, will therefore be considered as a further component in the historiography of this time. Lewis' passionate treatise, '*The Demon of Progress in the Arts*', published in 1954, will be put under particular scrutiny. The opinions and arguments in this publication have clear antecedents in his serious journalism of the preceding years that led up to this more fully presented argument.

Before presenting a fuller analysis of these post-War publications I turn my attention to the War-time period itself which can be seen as a time when writers

chose their words and subjects with especial care, but who were also concerned to maintain a semblance of normal discursive activity.

The War Years

As could be expected the output of modern art historians during the early years of the War itself was meagre, but what was published regularly revived the notion that the modernist work before the Great War had been prescient about the conflict in its violent rejection of artistic convention. At this point, twenty years later the foresight of artists was also duly bestowed on the new generation of modern artists working in the late thirties; this was clearly a discursive reaction which served a powerful cultural need and which thereby recharged the trope of uncanny insights that could now be ascribed to two generations of radical artists.

As an exception within this period of austerity, in 1943, Faber and Faber produced a surprisingly lavish monograph on Sickert. It included an essay by R.H. Wilenski, whose writing on modern art had been prominent in the two previous decades. Wilenski, in offering his views at this later juncture, is moved to comment acidly on the London scene before the Great War, seeing it as an almost wholly negative influence. In comments that are a strong reinforcement of the widespread idea that London offered a less than stimulating environment for talented artists he says,

The first half of the Camden town period ran from the middle of 1905 to the autumn of 1910; and I must make two observations before passing to the second. The first is that Sickert, in spite of everything, did suffer in one respect from his London environment in these years. For he was led thereby to paint some unadventurous portraits and a number of loosely descriptive semi-portrait heads of little more interest than the hundreds of such things which London artists

*habitually produce on mornings when they are hard put to answer the question: 'What on earth shall I paint today?'*²

The kind of environmental handicap Wilenski outlines is developed predictably into references to Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1910-11 which he says, had occasioned an epiphany for many artists. Wilenski is careful to nuance this coarsely-grained mantra, but nevertheless he faithfully reports the idea that English artists were only activated and inspired after this exhibition. He does concede that artists had had some exposure to early Cézanne and French Impressionists at the Durand-Ruel exhibition in 1905, but goes on to say,

*But of Cézanne's later work and Post-Impressionism and the contemporary French painting I have referred to in the last paragraph they knew for the most part nothing... The effect on the English artists was overwhelming. All had to take sides for or against the tremendous creative forces here revealed. No one could remain indifferent. In Sickert's Camden Town circle the artists were intrigued by Gauguin and completely captured by Van Gogh; they were also delighted by the bright colours on Signac's pictures; and sober practitioners like Gilman rushed off to buy large tubes of cadmium, viridian, vermilion and Antwerp blue which they resolved to use at their full strength.*³

Wilenski is concerned at first to distance his central subject from this dramatic revelatory experience, swiftly elaborating on Sickert's French credentials in some detail. However, it is then suggested that Sickert had nevertheless reacted in 1910 by experiencing a mid-career crisis caused by his exposure to the new and not-so-new French art being exhibited in London. A dilemma is envisioned by Wilenski who wishes to both emphasise Sickert's merit to the reader and also to stress the handicaps that hampered him. His narrative therefore slants the old story of how French modernism had finally had

² Sickert, W. and Browse, L. (ed.) *Walter Sickert, with an essay on his art by R.H. Wilenski*, London: Faber, and Faber 1943 p.26

³ *ibid.* p.27

an impact on the naïve practitioners in old-fashioned, dreary and isolated England because he excludes Sickert from his harshest judgements.

With all this happening Sickert had to pause and think. He was just over fifty – the critical age for an artist when he has to choose between the easy path of repeating past successes while proclaiming to himself and others that creative art has ceased, and the hard path of fresh creative effort which alone can postpone decay. Hitherto he had discreetly revealed to London some aspects of the great continental renaissance; Camden Town and Bloomsbury had glimpsed this renaissance darkly through a Sickertian screen. Now all was different. The boys were behind the screen. He knew that he still held the respect of all the generations, not excluding the youngest – ipso facto the most critical and cruel. But if he became an Old Fogey he would surely lose it. What was he to do?⁴

Wilenski answers his own question, '... he (Sickert) went to the cupboard and let out Cézanne'. Aside from the overweening necessity to date artistic development to 1910, the background Wilenski offers to accentuate Sickert's seniority and influence is then transmuted into the above fictive description of an over- simplified personal moment of enlightenment that Sickert experienced. This speaks more of skilful story-telling than carefully documented biography and is a tendency which nourishes the dominant paradigm yet further, but one which Wilenski consciously deploys. Wilenski also seems to be parodying the well-worn notions of artistic development as he archly paraphrases the traditionally understood trajectory of an artist's body of work. It is this undertone that amounts to a nascent discursive awareness in this section of Wilenski's essay that is early evidence of moves towards questioning the tropes of recent art history, ideas that would not be fully and self-referentially debated by historians until much later.

Wilenski's essay then almost inevitably develops into a hagiography, suggesting that,

⁴ ibid. p.28

*... the younger men, when he (Sickert) pulled their legs and pretended to be hostile to the 'moderns', had to take off their hats to him and acknowledge that he still knew more than they did about the things that they most wanted to know.*⁵

This fulsome praise, of course, is in the nature of any monograph as balance and objectivity are compromised almost by definition. Nevertheless, however partial, a publication such as this cannot but feed into the overall consensus on English modernism particularly at a juncture during the second War when looking back to the early years was a rare event.

This proposition that favourably-constructed monographs are a significant contribution to the broad stream of retrospective analysis and the distillation of historical accounts is also evidenced by Raymond Mortimer's small book on Duncan Grant. Published in 1944 it was one of '*The Penguin Modern Painters*' series edited by Sir Kenneth Clark. The tone is much more ebullient than Wilenski's essay on Sickert but the standard tropes of revelation and rupture in 1910 are announced without question, as if no account of any early modernist can be approached without this forcibly framing the discussion. Mortimer even opens his essay declaring the year's revolutionary reputation. It is almost as if there is a literary over-enthusiasm for the event as it provides an easy entry-point for the historian anxious to find a beginning to lay the foundation for the middle and the end of the story to be told; a fictional device akin to '*once upon a time*' that is rarely omitted in accounts but is particularly prominent in this flamboyant opening sentence.

*The year 1910 is of capital importance in the history of English painting.*⁶

⁵ *ibid* p.29

⁶ Mortimer, R. *Duncan Grant*: London: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1944 p5

Mortimer goes on to perpetuate what can now be regarded as a simplistic myth, that at that precise moment in the story of Grant's development he underwent a radical change. '*... to a few young artists the show was a revelation, and among these was Duncan Grant.*' It is true that Grant's work was indeed energised by the Grafton Galleries exhibition but it is disingenuous to construct a plot that needs to imply his unawareness of Continental modernism until that moment in order to strengthen the drama of 1910. This account thus has the hall-mark of formulaic story-telling despite its several grains of truth. Mortimer continues to embroider his rather heavy-handed narrative by describing the rich and fertile soil for innovation that existed in Paris during these years and greatly over-stresses Grant's dedication to long years of training and academic technique. However, this then allows Mortimer to bring to bear the familiar dictum that experimentation has to have been preceded by an apprenticeship so that artists could acquire the right to become deviant radicals. Duncan Grant is assessed to have undergone this rite of passage with merit so that he was then able, according to Mortimer, to branch out artistically.

Duncan Grant was just at the right age to get the most advantage from the new movement. For eight years he had been studying the Old Masters and improving his technique for depicting appearances so that now he could afford to take liberties. (Post-Impressionism has been a temptation and a trap to many apprentice painters: to try to distort before you can represent is like trying to dance before you can walk.)⁷

This rather facile analysis of artistic development is followed by a long passage describing Grant's early work that is couched in terms that allowed no query as to Grant's quality and importance, although there are the usual side-swipes towards the public's inadequacy that were reflected in the work's mixed reception, rather than any suggestion of the art's inherent inadequacy.

⁷ *ibid.* p.9

At the time the pictures were astonishing, and intensely delightful to the few who were able to accept them.

Despite the brevity of Mortimer's essay this slim volume has relevance to the strands that shaped the totality of the debate about the early modernists during and just after the Second World War. What can be taken from the presence of publications such as this at that time, (and perhaps more universally), is that accessible monographs have a particular power to widely disseminate and perpetuate muscular narratives because they operate as an accentuating mechanism in parallel to more even-handed histories.

Towards the end of the War the prolific art writer William Gaunt, who later developed his views further in 1949, (see below) became involved in the first publication in a series of illustrated books on British painting called, *'Discussions on Art'*. His essay that introduces the volume *'British Painting – from Hogarth's Day to Ours'* and its highly condensed section on *'The Modern Age'* that occupies three of the fifteen pages, addresses the under-pinning impulses of modernism with a wide socio-economic perspective. The by-now clichéd inaugural moment of 1910 is cited at the outset, but Gaunt is careful to look prior to this for background and explanation. However, the doctrine of Franco-centric achievement, moderated refreshingly by memories of French reluctance, is elaborated dutifully although his metaphor of health-giving influence is a new idea.

*The Post-Impressionists offered something completely strange to the eyes of the British public. The hostile reaction was as prompt and violent as that of the French public had been to the Refusés of the Salon. On painters, however, it had a bracing and invigorating effect. The well-defined pattern of this new art made its appeal even though it seemed uncouth.*⁸

⁸ Gaunt, W. *British Painting from Hogarth's Day to Ours*; London: Avalon Press and Central Institute of Art and Design, 1945 p.21

This essay demonstrates a strong commitment to the idea that it was still appropriate to include Augustus John in the register of modernists but Gaunt's subtlety regarding this has a sophistication that pre-figures much later, more inclusive ways to understand and define English modernism.

*He (John) shows the poetical feeling of the earlier movement... At the same time he is a modern in his incisive sense of design and his expressive use of colour.*⁹

Gaunt's next paragraph illustrates a more pedantic point, namely that groups and nomenclature were still fluid to a degree. *'More closely akin to the new painting in France was the Bloomsbury school, of which Walter Sickert was the focus.'* This is not a designation that carries much currency in later writing but shows the extent to which the more familiar membership of 'Bloomsbury' is a construct that had lost its definition, despite Gaunt's geographical accuracy.

Gaunt then ventures into the territory of connecting modern art practice to the world outside – modernity in other words stating, *'The restless ingenuity of an inventive age, overwhelmed by the multitude of its machines, has inevitably affected the arts'*¹⁰. He conflates this analysis with views on art history's right to evolve as a describing and explaining discipline, which amounts to an interesting narrational interjection by the author that permits reflection on Gaunt's own professional concerns at the same time. Also of interest is that Gaunt is here arguing for a broader understanding of cultural contexts which he feels to be necessary if he is to explain and situate Lewis in particular; the bewildering multiplicity of 'isms' he feels inhibit an accurate historical perspective. Lewis is even denied the designation of Vorticist; an unusual and surprising exclusion, but one which allows Gaunt to join the small minority of

⁹ *ibid.* p.22

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.22

critics who over the decades resisted ready-made nomenclature, usually in a tentative but conscious effort to problematise narrative norms. Gaunt prefers to refer to Lewis' style as 'pre-War Cubism' ¹¹

Post-War

The Studio returned to the subject of British Art in 1946 in series of major articles by Michael Ayrton collectively entitled, '*The Heritage of British Painting*'. They are worthy of close attention as they were written at an important moment just after the War and are also a valuable contrast to the series of 1932 discussed in the previous chapter. Although still highly critical of the pioneering modern artists, these four essays offer a knowledgeable art historical argument of some rigour.

Ayrton's opening position cuts straight to an explanation of the '*apparent lack of continuity and logical evolution*' in British art. He then swiftly transfers the argument to matters of national self-confidence equivocally laying blame on the English national character, a stance which he can adopt as this rhetoric of ambiguous modesty and self-effacement would be more permissible now that the War had been won.

*If we in England have one virtue carried to excess it is our deplorable modesty and sense of inferiority when discussing our own visual arts. All too rarely, during the last five hundred years, have we been prepared to place our own productions, even in our minds, beside those of other European nations and thus the English painter and draughtsman has seldom been taken seriously enough either at home or abroad.*¹²

¹¹ *ibid* p.23

¹² Ayrton, Michael, 'The Heritage of British Painting' in , *The Studio*, Vol. cxxxii No 641 August 1946 p.33

However, Ayrton's position is subtle and new as he argues that it is, '*national quality which makes art international*' making it '*worthy of exchange with those of other nations*'.¹³ Ayrton's second article entitled '*Inferiority Complex*' focuses on the nineteenth century and secures the argument that,

*France, of all countries in Europe, is the most capable...when it comes to that part of the nature of personal or national genius which makes the most of other people's preliminary work. Where Britain would succumb to a domination in art France would revive under a stimulus.*¹⁴

This allows Ayrton to launch his estimation of the emergence of modern art in England mindful of his comments on France. In fact Ayrton moves to a highly critical position when his extended essay reaches the early twentieth century. His ire is most directed at Post-Impressionists '*under the diligent sponsorship of Roger Fry*' saying that '*a whole host of British painters went off the rails into a welter of Parisian mannerisms which withered them like so many leaves in autumn.*'¹⁵ Ayrton preserves some respect for Sickert, Pryde and Steer who '*were in fact pursuing as much of their own course as was possible under the weight of France.*'

Ayrton's third article in the series returns to the situation in 1910 and this time his comments deal with Lewis, placing his lasting contribution at the centre of pre -World War I achievement.

*Mr Wyndham Lewis and the 'Vorticists' came out with a vital and important contribution to British art which was all but frittered away during World War I, though it was of considerable significance in its time, while the work of Lewis himself is even now an influence on several of the younger generation of British painters.*¹⁶

¹³ *ibid.* p.35

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.65 September 1946

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.69

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.103 October 1946

Ayrton's final article is concerned chiefly with more recent art; nevertheless he rehearses Lewis' pre-eminence, this time emphasising his Vorticist art as contemporary with the earliest work of Spencer and Paul Nash both of whom Ayrton regards as '*intensely English*' and who all had been '*engaged in the resuscitation of British painting during and just after the last War.*'¹⁷ This is a clear denial of any significance that could be attached to art before the Great War more generally.

In 1949 William Gaunt published a much broader survey and analysis of modern art than his publication of 1945. '*The March of the Moderns*' is a little-known serious, although accessible, history of modernism that is rarely cited, but its chapter on English modern art is of historiographical interest. Gaunt's many populist publications over several decades may have contributed to the relative obscurity of this carefully constructed account. He gives much attention to the pan-European strands of modern art, but also integrates intelligent and lengthy discussion of the manifestation of this in Britain. Gaunt resists the standard practice of offering a broad opening introductory chapter and instead immerses the reader immediately into a colourful invocation of Cézanne in Aix-en-Provence. There is a strong narrative quality to his opening sentence that belies the serious analysis that will be embedded in this story-telling style.

*One wet day in October 1906, drenched to the skin, a little old man with bowed shoulders and a knapsack on his back, struggles home through the rain, over hilly country, in the region of Aix-en-Provence. He was the painter Paul Cezanne.*¹⁸

¹⁷ *ibid.* p 144-5 November 1946

¹⁸ Gaunt, W. *The March of the Moderns*: London: Jonathan Cape, 1949 p.7

Gaunt spends the next one hundred pages or so moving through his history of Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin, followed by the Nabis and Fauves. Having clearly made a case for precedent and lineage in this fourth chapter he then, somewhat inconsistently, situates '*what amounted to a revolution*' from 1910 firmly within a contemporary environment of scientific discovery – Einstein, Curie, and Freud are the intellectual complements to the Cubists.

*As the Cubists turned an object into a 'process' so the scientist turns the a substance into a disintegrated energy*¹⁹

Gaunt goes on to position the Italian Futurists in relation to the new experiences of speed, the exciting pace of cinema and their eagerness to hail war as thrilling. His punchy style conveys a confident zest as he deals with the sequence of 'isms' he feels bound to hasten through at journalistic pace.

*The Futurists had their own logic. War was to be glorified. War was not women's business. Therefore women were to be despised. A battle ship was better than a beautiful body...*²⁰

Gaunt's originality lies in his ability to look afresh at the usual clichés, and to mount an assault on the Franco-centric narrative. His fifth chapter is entitled, '*Art Without a Country*' and this signals his proposition that the over-worked version of art history that suggested all things modern were likely to be French was a crude shorthand.

These developments in art did not minister to national pride or satisfy national feeling. They had grown up in France: and yet the outcome was not French. The Frenchman might feel gratified that his capital was the resort of gifted individuals from all over the world; proud of the tolerance, the sympathetic atmosphere which had made it so. He would scarcely maintain that Picasso was in reality a French artist or that Cubism was in the French tradition.

¹⁹ *ibid* p.100

²⁰ *ibid* p106

*The patriot was, therefore, prejudiced against these new developments.*²¹

This obvious, but rarely expressed point, allows a new argument of cultural specificity to open up for Gaunt when he turns his attention to England. Gaunt notes the Grafton Galleries exhibition as an inaugural moment, unusually without mentioning the designation '*Post-Impressionism*'. He elaborates colourfully on British society as having, '*A polished, conventional class-conscious culture*' and contrasts this with modernity's grimmer realities in England '*behind the scenes*'.²² The story he tells veers noticeably towards explaining the culture of art's reception, rather than its production, and Roger Fry's role is extensively noted. Gaunt explains the circumstances surrounding the formation of the Camden Town Group and Sickert's leading role in stimulating "*an English 'post-impressionism'*"²³ He then moves to make the link between Futurism and Wyndham Lewis and Gaunt cites Lewis' differences with Sickert in a manner that stresses the lively environment in London as new ideas were being forged. The well-known strained relationship between Fry and Lewis is also described before he gives his account of Vorticism. The pre-eminence he ascribes to this movement as the only domestic avant-garde venture allows Gaunt to resuscitate a well-worn trope of national inadequacy in the same breath, demonstrating that self-effacement could still be used to undercut art historical rhetoric.

*...the only militant attempt in England in this century (... little accustomed to such intellectual exercises) to devise a new movement.*²⁴

²¹ *ibid.* p.119

²² *ibid.* p.127

²³ *ibid.* p.143

²⁴ *ibid.* p.148

Gaunt's treatment of Vorticism is of much greater length and understanding than other histories during the immediate post Second World War period. It demonstrates an almost unique commitment to contextualise and find new explanations for its successes and failures and as such represents a major statement of Vorticism's status in the history of English modernism at this juncture. It has also to be noted at this point that Gaunt does not give any serious attention to the Bloomsbury post-Impressionists at any point – relegating their oeuvre only to contributions as participants in the Omega workshop. It has to be concluded that this was borne out of a conscious judgment rather than ignorance of their total output.

However, Vorticism, and the manifesto of the movement, '*Blast*', occasions serious attention. Gaunt's view is that, "*'Blast', if not Vorticism, was a success.*"²⁵ Gaunt however departs dramatically from the usual accounts of the visual achievements of the Vorticists and chooses instead to describe, what is crucial to him, - its literary and philosophical importance. After spending nearly 150 pages describing modernism in the visual arts his abrupt leap to the non-visual aspects of Vorticism is significant. The reader is led away from art history whilst a case is made for Vorticism's achievements in other spheres. However, when introducing Lewis, Gaunt shows his enthusiasm for describing the cultural clashes of painters in London at this time, in which Lewis participated.

*No one saw with a severer eye the varied or even subtle differences of the disputing groups.*²⁶

²⁵ *ibid.* p.148

²⁶ *ibid.* p.146

There is no attempt at all to describe the visual experiments and achievements of Vorticist painting. Gaunt moves instead into a knowledgeable exposition on T.E.Hulme and Bergson and a lengthy passage on Ezra Pound. He concedes, in lukewarm terms, that Vorticism, '*attracted a few artists*'²⁷, but then only instances Henri Gaudier Brzeska. This history of modernism then moves into the War years and beyond.

It is striking therefore that Gaunt, in 1949, presents Vorticism as a pre-dominantly literary and philosophical episode, dismisses Bloomsbury post-Impressionism almost entirely, and delineates the Camden Town painters as '*an English post-Impressionism*'. His summative evaluation of the latter reprises the more negative element in Camden Town's critical reception history, stressing its derivative characteristics; a contrast to kinder treatments elsewhere. The parochialism of '*native island*' and the derogatory connotations of '*charm*' would be hard for any reader to see as positive.

A group was formed – the 'Camden Town Group'. 'We have made history', said Sickert on that occasion. Its title, the interest of its members in painting London and especially north London, speak of Sickert. Their method, like that of the Nabis in France, owed more to Gauguin and van Gogh. To say that it was an echo of French art after a time-lag of twenty years is not to deny it a native island charm.
28

Overall Gaunt's extended survey of modernism, and interestingly, the roots of modernism across Europe somewhat shifts the debates on the English exponents in a direction that buries their efforts even deeper in a pan-European avalanche, and at the same time gives some passing attention to their minor flurry of activity that, he suggests, was particularly stimulated by the Futurists' presence in London. The proposition that Vorticism was primarily valuable for its

²⁷ *ibid.* p.151

²⁸ *ibid.* p.143

literary and philosophical elements strengthens the dominant view of Lewis in the immediate post-war years as a writer who used to paint, this being prior to his reputation as a painter that was later rehabilitated. Gaunt's history is also notable for its attempt to develop a compelling story-telling style that emphasises personalities and colourful events combined with an interwoven propensity to digress into intellectually robust theoretical expositions. In this way it can be regarded as an awkward but original synthesis of two of the art historical genres operating concurrently at this time.

Wyndham Lewis had not resided in England during the War, preferring an extended stay in North America. However, when he returned to England he became an active commentator on contemporary art especially through his journalism for *The Listener* from 1946 -51. This may have been considered by Lewis as a disappointment for his ambitions but when eventually penniless and stranded in the United States he had pleaded with John Rothenstein to find him work – including the editorship of *The Listener*.²⁹

However, Lewis' presence within the critical reception mechanisms of modern art during this period is that of a voice of authority and authenticity although this is sometimes compromised by abrasive over-emphasis and deliberate provocation. He continued to develop his acerbic critiques and passions in a manner that undoubtedly spiced the debates with a voice that contrasts strongly with the knowing polished professionalism of Clark, Rothenstein, Read and others. This diversity of critical styles and stances coalesced into a post-War commentary on English modern art that tends, when seen as a whole narrative, increasingly to caricature, contain or romanticise the

²⁹ Wyndham Lewis, - correspondence, TGA, 7813/3/2/2. In a letter to John Rothenstein of Nov. 17th, 1942, Lewis, discussing his return to England, asks, 'could I secure the editorship of *The Listener* or something like that?'

early modern pioneers. There is also a growing tendency by this time for the Bloomsbury Post-Impressionist faction, previously organised and championed by Fry, to be of fading interest and esteem, as a gathering fondness for Sickert's followers and a respect for Lewis' pre-War associates fulfils the teleological need to pre-figure the great acclaim given to the art of the Great War itself.

It is pertinent then, given the critical landscape just outlined, to look more closely at the rhetoric and critical interventions of Lewis himself, and this analysis will be demonstrated to be a piquant counterpoint to Rothenstein's survey, *'Modern English Painters'* and Read's more oblique assessment in *'Contemporary British Art'*, both of which sealed the story of the early modernists for several years to follow.

The complex self-regard for his place in history is not the only preoccupation Lewis has in these post-War years although this figures prominently and often. There are other matters that clearly fire his indignation. His review in *The Listener* of Gertler's exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery occasions one such matter that combines his urge to chide the public's Philistinism he believes to be a corrosive force in English art with more positive appreciations of an individual artist's fundamental worth.

Have you noticed in latter-day England how artists show great promise, often, and then 'go off' – or actually go to pieces? It is not the rule elsewhere that artists get worse as they get older. Why that phenomenon only is met here is easily explained. Their power does not prematurely wane any more than Rembrandt's or Titian's, or Cézanne's or Daumier's or Poussin's. No what happens... But you know how sweet a tooth our public has, how unwilling it is to give its attention to anything a little severe. How it exerts its slothful, sentimental pressure from the first moment a fine artist reveals himself. Flowers, and still lifes with jolly little ornaments soon begin to appear in an English artist's work. It is all he can sell. Some in the

*end do no more good work at all. Gertler did – it is that that causes one to be particularly indignant.*³⁰

The fiery attack in this outburst is clearly intensified by the pain of Gertler's suicide ten years before, assumed by Lewis to have happened '*simply because no one would buy his pictures, and he had no money.*³¹ Nevertheless his point stands as indicative of the way commentary on art at this time could readily regard economic forces as detrimental to its achievements and which continued to reiterate the belief that the general public in England were beyond cultural redemption.

This type of conversational invective is a literary style that Lewis made almost his own within the art writing world of these decades and this example shows that his deteriorating health and advancing years had not diminished his characteristic vehemence. A historiographical perspective on this kind of crafted, yet knowledgeable analytical fluency allows a view to be held that Lewis, in some way, developed and held the remit to declaim, albeit authoritatively, within the discursive space that the vehicles of critical reception jointly excavated. An unwritten understanding, tacitly guided by the dynamics of art's reception, that he would occupy the platform for truths to be loudly asserted, and that others would more sedately argue and substantiate their ideas seems difficult to argue against.

Lewis' review of The Camden Town Group exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery, (*The Listener* 9th November 1950), characteristically contravenes the polite trend for gentle unchallenging praise for their work. *The Times* review amply contrasts with this in its insipid reinforcement of the consensual measure of bland respect that was by now a feature of the critical mainstream.

³⁰ Lewis in *The Listener*, 14th July, 1949

³¹ *ibid.*

... the paintings shown here belong to that remarkable moment in the history of British painting when the first post-impressionist exhibition had just been held and a number of artists were in transition between impressionism and later styles derived from the French³².

In huge contrast Lewis takes the opportunity to claim his authority as a witness; 'As to the Camden Town Group of forty years ago I was there' before he indirectly, and damningly, refers to them as 'dull dogs and dull groups'³³. He then builds a retrospective fulmination that marks his ability to oppose the dominant drift of opinion that any reader would consider, in this case, he had earned the right to challenge. Lewis proves again that he is a lively irritant in the art-writing world one whose controversial directness complements the safer analysis of other opinion-formers. His consistent respect for Gilman over the decades is to be noted, dating in the historiography from 1919 (see chapter 3).

A pervading dinginess, drabness, and marked lack of interest in form, is what one is aware of as one gazes around one – not the fact that there were of course some who, given the power, would have liked to be one thing, some another. That is how this collection of artists appeared to me at the time: past sensations are revived, no more. An honourable exception is Gilman.³⁴

Lewis, during these years was also instrumental in the way his own work was being situated in historical accounts. There are many occasions on which he consigns his early work, especially that of Vorticist abstraction, to youthful exploration that time proved ultimately not worthy of being sustained. This receives an intense focus in 'The Demon of Progress in the Arts' of 1954 (see below)– but the Introduction he wrote for his 1949 retrospective exhibition at the Redfern Gallery has a particularly calm tone as he accounts for his differing artistic periods and expounds theories of abstraction.

³² *The Times*, November 20th, 1950

³³ Lewis in *The Listener* 9th November 1950

³⁴ *ibid.*

In the year or two prior to World War I, I attempted to totally eliminate from my work all reference to nature. This is not the place to expound my motives: it is enough to say that you will not find any work of mine later in date so 'abstract' as that....

Since that first period, then, I have made use of abstractionist modes, employed stark simplifications, and availed myself of stylistic habits which remained with me, to achieve some unusual effect, or to serve me in some expressionist excursion. It is legitimate to avail ourselves of the abstract tongue in this way, in order to heighten or flavour the concrete – provided there is no pretence of being truly abstract – or no phoney scientific pretence.³⁵

Lewis is neither quiet nor tamed for long though as he then chooses in this piece to air a grievance, which has a central bearing on this research. He decides to publicly account for the dearth of publications that contain reproductions of his painting. He relates it directly to the mismatch between his audacious revolutionary period and the lamentable cultural environment in Britain, rehearsing eloquently a critical refrain of his own, - and many others since the late nineteenth century.

As to the 'long conspiracy of silence' to which Mr. Ayrton³⁶, with the generosity and courage of youth, alludes: that no book exists with reproductions of my work (where there are so many books), that the considerable body of work, collected through the enterprise of this gallery, here seen for the first time, should have remained unknown for so long, are the kind of things which I find are apt to provoke the impartial observer, or of course friend, to comment. Let us say (not to indulge in truths that would lead straight to suits for libel) that the 'conspiracy' dates from 1913 – it has been, as Mr. Ayrton says, long: from the time in fact that I hustled the cultural Britannia, stepping up that cautious pace with which she prefers to advance. Apart from anything else, for that one is never forgiven.³⁷

This is an embittered passage that reveals Lewis' chagrin but it also provides a valuable and accurate historiographic comment on the gaps that

³⁵ Lewis, W. Introduction to the Exhibition catalogue, Redfern Gallery, 1949. quoted in Michel, W. and Fox, C.J. (eds.), *Wyndham Lewis on Art – Collected Writings 1913-1956*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969, pp449-50

³⁶ An unknown reference but one which concurs with the 1946 articles by Ayrton in *The Studio* discussed above.

³⁷ Michel, W. and Fox, C.J. 1969, p450

arose in the general enterprise of publishing appropriate and timely monographs and illustrated histories.

The publication in 1954 of *'The Demon of Progress in the Arts'* gave Lewis an opportunity to expound his views on the hostile cultural environment that he believed to be damaging, and which he had cause to regard as the engine of 'extremism' in art as well as music. The major part of this treatise of nearly one hundred pages concerns itself with the denouncements of the workings of the art market, and the wider cultural enterprise, and suggests that it is extreme abstraction which is the danger to all the young talent. He expresses the risks with his characteristic hyperbole and melodrama drawing on shocking metaphors of disease as he frets about his own role in assessing the traps they might fall into.

*Perhaps I could stolidly observe this brood of brilliant painters
stricken with a black vomiting which I recognised as the plague.*³⁸

A highly charged and highly crafted argument is made with a clear mission to shock and thereby alert readers to the dangers of abstraction. Reference is also made to his own experimental stage which cements the retractions Lewis had been making for some years. However, in this context there is a crescendo in his tone that must be regarded as deliberately offered to authoritatively fuel the way the early adventures in the years just before the first War would be evaluated.

The opening paragraphs are not only quoted in full in order to substantiate this inevitably influential retrospective negativity, but also to demonstrate the dark humour Lewis could summon up without relinquishing any sincerity or passion. This is a literary style, applied to estimations of recent art history, that

³⁸ Lewis, W. *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1954 p.6

had no parallel at this time and so its place in the historiography is important to recognise in terms of its wit and originality. The quotation below is in stark contrast to the standard, more self-effacing explanations of the short-lived early experimentation in England.

Extremism is not easy to define or describe. It is a disease like foot and mouth disease, which disastrously visits, not cattle, but artists. It is a disease which appeared, for the first time, among European artists, not more than fifty years ago. The kinds of artist among which the symptoms were most easily identified were the painter and the sculptor. It is not, however, a virus to which the visual artist, and no other, is susceptible. It was an accident that it was among them that it first manifested itself. The first case to be reported in these islands was mine, around 1913. You may imagine the sensation created – it was like the first Colorado beetle to be spotted in our rich brown fields, clinically free of odious sub-tropical pests.

Fortunately, for me the disease did not have time to mature. Another scourge, namely war, intervened. While, in one way and another, suffering from this martial pestilence I began to think a little. I recognised that, prior to the war, I had been visited by a complaint of a most unusual kind, I saw that it was irrational to attempt to transmute the art of painting into music – to substitute for the most naturally concrete of the arts the most inevitably abstract. So of course I recovered my reason. This did not mean that I abandoned a twentieth-century way of seeing. I escaped – that was all- from reaching a point, very soon, where I should have ceased to be a visual artist at all. For what I was headed for, obviously was to fly away from the world of men, of pigs, of chickens and alligators, and go to live in the unwatered moon, only a moon sawed up into square blocks, in the most alarming way. What an escape I had!³⁹

Lewis also makes attacks on what he regarded as slavish artistic fads explored by other notable pre-War modernists. The ridicule is un-moderated, showing that when in full flow his sharp-tongued style brooks no sensitivities to old associates.

Once a week, I think it was, a group of painters formed the habit of meeting in the large first-floor of 'The Newcomes' in Fitzroy Street, not long before World War One. I remember, on one occasion, Walter Sickert dramatically announcing, in a rhyme which still rings in my ears:

Mr. Ginner's

³⁹ *ibid.* p.3

Painting thinner

Mr. Sicker's

Painting thicker.

*This meant of course, that the painter, Charles Ginner, was entering upon a 'thin period'; whereas Walter Sickert was going thick – was having a 'thick period'*⁴⁰

This kind of anecdote can be dismissed as light-hearted reminiscence introduced for comic effect, but it also seems arguable that this fluent negativity is nonetheless an important formative element in the narrative that shaped artistic reputations and stature, - in this case clearly unfavourably. In the wider context of Lewis' angry diatribe this small contribution to the history of the Camden Town Group is intended to be taken seriously.

Lewis was not the only artist to engage in remembering the early years with such a personal overtone. Augustus John published what was called, '*Chiaroscuro – fragments of an autobiography*' in 1952. The book is indeed fragmentary and highly anecdotal but his passing appraisal of Lewis inevitably flowed into a hardening consensus as to the negligible achievement of the Vorticists.

*It seemed to me clear that there could be no future, as there was no past, for Futurism. Lewis' Vorticism, which followed, might have been suitably prefixed with an A, for it came to nothing.*⁴¹

Lewis makes no reference to this sharp dismissal in a review of this book he wrote for *The Listener*. The review is respectful and affectionate and lightly couched, although it could be construed that Lewis was, despite his politeness, was happy to consign John's sketchy effort to the margins of serious memoirs and serious comments on the modernists.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.24

⁴¹ John, A. *Fragments of an Autobiography*. London: Jonathan Cape 1952. This quotation from Grey Arrow edition 1962 p.65

...the book consists of a great number of more or less short pieces, each supplied with a descriptive heading.... Undoubtedly, there will be temptation to regard this book, because of its form, as a 'lucky dip'⁴²

'*Contemporary British Art*' by Herbert Read was first published in 1951 and is representative of a long-standing genre of brief art histories that had wide circulation, but yet were careful not to compromise the serious reputation and status of the author. In this instance the book predominantly comprises plates of modern art 1937-1950 and very short, '*notes on the artists*'. This is a formula that frequently recurs in the literature, based on an unstated notion that a visual record and minimal biographical detail is an acceptable summary mechanism for art to be grouped and mapped. Read however, wishes to lay down some larger context and his introductory essay in its 1951 edition is an example of his perceptions of British art history at this time. As has been proposed in relation to other slight publications it is possible to be confident that this was an important manifestation of the core narrative that was in circulation, particularly as Read's range and influence was by now well-proven. Importantly, Read's rhetoric has to be seen in the context of his involvement that year in The Festival of Britain when new ideas of national achievement were offered as part of the formation of a Post-War sensibility.

Read's opening comments rehearse the universal dilemma of art writers as they try to assess work that has, as yet, not been tried and tested by the historical process and passage of time. This can be regarded perhaps, with some disappointment, as the hedging tactic of most critics of modern art that has been noted repeatedly in earlier chapters. Read says he lacks, '*the advantage*

⁴² Lewis in *The Listener*, 20th March, 1952.

*of historical perspective'*⁴³. He then defends the necessary choices he has to make for the colour and black and white plates by saying that his criterion is, *'illustrations that throw significant light on the historical situation with which we are dealing.'* This is an opaque policy and he clarifies this only to a limited extent.

*In this way I may well exclude Mr X, whose work, in a traditional style I admire, and include Mr Y for whose experimental style I feel no immediate sympathy.*⁴⁴

Pausing to consider this self-justification allows a historiographical point to be made that reaches beyond the specifics of the new art of the 1950s Read is about to introduce. What can be discerned in these comments by Read is one of the inner mechanisms of the sorting and sifting processes that art history universally undertakes. He makes it entirely apparent that radical innovative work has an inbuilt power to supplant that which has gone before, even at the expense of a critic's professional judgement.

Of central concern to this research project is the way Read then handles the recent past. He proposes the standard chronology to his wide audience.

*The modern period in British art may be said to date from the year 1910.*⁴⁵

Read sums up the first decade of the century, highlighting Brangwyn, John and Epstein. Read shows some deference to Charles Marriott's 1920 book, *'Modern Movements in Painting'* by quoting a comment therein on Augustus John.

...he is, so to speak, a Post-Impressionist without knowing it.

⁴³ Read, H. *Contemporary British Art*, London: Penguin 1951 p.13

⁴⁴ *ibid* p. 13-14

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p.14

This is clearly a device to strengthen Read's view that the early modernism in England was emerging, but had no particular sense of itself in the evolution of art – a naivety that meant, as Read goes on to say, quoting Marriott again, most artists were involved in '*the domestication of French Impressionism without prejudice to the native tradition.*'⁴⁶

Read then goes on to comment on all the chief protagonists of the Camden Town Group, the associated Fitzroy group and the merger of these into The London Group. His overall estimation is positive: '*Post-Impressionism was now a coherent movement in England*'⁴⁷ This is a statement that has a tidying-up tinge to it that had not appeared hitherto in accounts of this period, and perhaps demonstrates that a time had come, by the early fifties, to group and classify, and even to propose grander sweeps for history. Read offers, in this year of national celebration, a diplomatic nuance to his next assertion that '*the fact that the whole of this generation derived its inspiration from the French school,*' by immediately looking back to when the French school had '*taken deep draughts of inspiration from England – from Constable, Bonington and Turner.*'⁴⁸

Wyndham Lewis however is noted by Read for his French experience that is acclaimed because it uniquely matured into a '*style of his own*', Vorticism. Read is at pains to concur with Lewis' own persistently reiterated view that he had instigated this strand of modernism single-handedly. The evaluation of Vorticism according to Read forms part of a larger agenda that builds throughout the whole essay. The argument is an attempt to find reconciliation between lauding a natural reversion to national characteristics, and recognising the valuable injection of influences from northern European art. Andrew

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p.14

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.14

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.15

Causey, compares Read's attempt to contextualise the Festival of Britain in 1951 in this publication to the shifts in attitude after the First World War thus giving a broader appreciation of a discursive pattern which alternates the ascendancy of the local with that of the importation of ideas from elsewhere.

*As an essentially post-war attitude to art, it parallels the *rappel à l'ordre* that followed 1918, with the reappropriation of classicism as the 'real' tradition of French art in opposition to Cubism, and the resurgence of eighteenth century tastes in England against Vorticism.⁴⁹*

Thus the case can be made that this essay by Read has a thoughtful and rigorous awareness of history guiding its contemporary focus, belying its position as the introduction to a populist publication, and an essay which also sheds particular light on how early modernists were being written into recent history.

It has to be said also that Read's allusions to Grant and Vanessa Bell arrive a few pages later as some kind of after-thought, and also significantly in terms of the faltering Bloomsbury tradition, neither painter's work was illustrated despite their on-going output.

There are many more painters who might be placed in the group that derives its inspiration from the school of Paris, and some of them like Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, would normally be treated at some length in any comprehensive account of modern English painting.⁵⁰

This introductory essay by Read serves as a demonstration of the way a wide-ranging overview of British art condenses and packages the early modern experiments. The clichés are clearly dragooned into the narrative to serve what is nevertheless an intelligent overview committed to the ebb and flow of indigenous effort and in-coming influences over many centuries. In this broadest

⁴⁹ Causey, A. 'Herbert Read and Contemporary Art' in Goodway, D. (ed) *Herbert Read Reassessed*: Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998 p. 142

⁵⁰ Read, H. 1951 p.18

of contexts English modernists never fare well, in clear contrast to the much more sympathetic narratives when the focus is narrow, both temporally and geographically. It is this latter mode that John Rothenstein writes in '*Modern English Painters*' and which is the final published text to be considered.

However, as will be examined, the Bloomsbury modernists are roughly treated, to the extent that Rothenstein's motives have been a subject of debate in the literature ever since.

The first two volumes of Rothenstein's, '*Modern English Painters*' are the definitive publications concerning English modern art published in the early 1950s. Correspondence archives demonstrate that Rothenstein became involved much earlier in discussions that bordered on the contractual, with F.A. Mercer at the Studio Ltd. who were keen to publish, '*the standard work on contemporary oil painting and oil painters*.'⁵¹ However, John Rothenstein, '*terminated the whole project*' in January 1946⁵² and the negotiations ceased apart from some loose threats that Rothenstein should not publish on this exact brief for at least six months. Rothenstein had in fact begun discussions for a similar project the previous month with Eyre and Spottiswoode who then guided Rothenstein towards the eventual title; the working title having been '*Twentieth Century English Painters*.'⁵³ The final decision to opt for 'modern' in the title is considered below but it can be noted here that this was clearly a matter for debate rather than a label that found an easy consensus.

Frances Spalding's account of the Tate Gallery's chequered history describes the years 1938-64, during which John Rothenstein was its Director as

⁵¹ TGA 8726/2/1 F.A. Mercer to Rothenstein, 17th October 1944.

⁵² TGA 8726/2/1 Rothenstein to F.A. Mercer, 22nd January 1946.

⁵³ Correspondence archives reveal this debate. (TGA 8726/2/1) – the final title being suggested by Douglas Jerrold in September 1950

especially turbulent.⁵⁴ She re-creates an environment of organisational politics, intrigue and scandal of which Rothenstein was both a victim and a perpetrator. The in-fighting he endured and the poor management he was responsible for led to huge distractions and unnecessary interventions by politicians and other leading figures in the art world – notably Douglas Cooper at the National Gallery. This often destructive ferment was the environment in which Rothenstein worked on *'Modern English Painters'*. Its structure as a history is simple; an introductory essay followed by short essays on the chosen individual artists and 32 black and white plates in each of volumes 1 and 2. It can be argued that such a straightforward formula was retrograde but its success as a series is a historiographical reality. A strong explanation of its success has to be the dominance and notoriety of Rothenstein himself as an important, although controversial figure. His powerbase at the Tate Gallery lent huge authority to his opinions and demonstrates the advantage of writers who were also in curatorial control of history and artists' reputations; J.B. Manson being another instance of someone able to exploit this kind of pivotal position in the art world. It can also be asserted that this publishing formula was clearly one which reached out to an audience of cultured, but not necessarily scholarly readers who were ready in post-War Britain to enrich their understanding and appreciation of modern art. As has been noted in Read's book, it is the introductory essay that establishes a more challenging set of views and it is this which is the key to enquiring into the how early modernists were being offered their place in history by Rothenstein in the early 1950s. These publications, which exhibited such an accessible formula, had no competition from scholarly histories of English modern art as these had not yet begun to appear. Thus the fact that Rothenstein, and others

⁵⁴ Spalding, F. *The Tate – a History*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998.

mentioned above, concerned themselves principally with books for the educated generalist, rather than scholars of art history, indicates a partial critical vacuum.

The choice of the descriptor 'Modern' that Rothenstein eventually selected for his title requires some commentary at this point as he uses this designation as a purely temporal category to cover the artists he feels are worthy of consideration, that is those who have been alive and working since the oldest chosen was born, - Sickert. This inclusiveness emphasises the flexibility and fluidity of the term 'modern' that did not align tidily with the groupings of artists that had provided such a ready structure for the narrative concerning pre-war modern art. Rothenstein's chosen title '*Modern English Painters*' is notable therefore for its unwavering and literal adherence to chronology, and indeed he offers a strongly stated rationale that his chosen individuals are best served by this framework for the expression of his views. His governing idea is that the English are characterised by their individuality. Rothenstein thus uses a culturally specific argument to justify this rejection of an otherwise strong art historical tendency to shape arguments and build a historical trajectory through groups of artists. It may be the case that when considered historiographically his biographical structure can be considered limiting, in that cross-cutting analyses become difficult to develop, and he risks becoming hidebound in a catalogue of abbreviated monographs. This could reduce Rothenstein's engagement with, and explanations of, what many others have seen as *strands* of modern art practice that can be legitimately delineated. If the opinion that this major publication is hampered by its simple structure is tenable, then it is possible to argue further that this weakness points to an analytical deficit in the output of commentators during the 1950s, given this series' ubiquity and lasting

presence. Rothenstein almost fully occupied a critical niche in the literature and so his conceptual methodology, as well as his specific views, acquired a tenacious reputation as the voice of this time on this subject.

However, as has been referred to, the vehicle of the introductory essay does grant Rothenstein his moment to establish some over-arching substance and theoretical analysis before the biographically structured material takes over. The first volume of 1952 is sub-titled '*Sickert to Smith*' and here Rothenstein collates a group of artists that is later extended in the 1956 volume, subtitled '*Lewis to Moore*'⁵⁵. The organising principle is strictly chronological, based on the date of birth of the artists included. This has an immediate and strange compromising effect on the reader wishing to obtain a sense of the periods of production that art history customarily identifies. In order to assess his view of the pre-War Modernists working in the years 1910-15 it is necessary to look at both Volumes One and Two to gain a real grasp of Rothenstein's outlook on this pivotal moment. A very logical date-of-birth chronological framework must have seemed the most manageable way to handle his brief, a logic that precluded any possibility of constructing an introductory essay that probed the complexity of the emergence of modern art and so the chief exponents of modernism are clumsily and arbitrarily bifurcated by their dates of birth into two volumes. The older artists included in the first volume, and who have featured strongly in the accounts of modernism examined in this research are: Sickert, Gilman, Augustus John, Ginner and Gore. They are in the company of twelve other artists whose work is normally evaluated in accounts of English art that flourished around and just after the turn of the century – Orpen, Steer, William Nicholson and so on. However, Rothenstein has bestowed the descriptor

⁵⁵ The parameters of later editions after 1956 were modified

'modern' on all of them, and so his opening essay responds only to the broadest and simplest understanding of this designation. Somewhat defensively Rothenstein anticipates any criticism of his organisational principle in a preface. His first paragraph asserts the idea that, '*groups of artists have a way of dissolving under scrutiny*'⁵⁶ This, Rothenstein then argues is a problem peculiar to modern times.

*In earlier, less disintegrated periods, there was some meaning in the classification of artists according to the tradition to which they belonged, but in our time the general enfeeblement and even collapse of traditions has made the classification of original artists almost impossible: they exist by virtue of their individual selves alone. The chronological arrangement of the chapters that follow is intended to emphasise the individuality of their subjects by cutting them off from all fortuitous and ephemeral groupings.*⁵⁷

This resort to the notion of individuals only existing autonomously in recent art history is Rothenstein's way of expressing regret about 'tradition' - a term he loads with positive value. Modern art as a new tradition, it is already clear, in his view, is incapable of being identified as such in the early twentieth century in England. The standard way to avoid definite assessments of new art is to maintain that the history is too recent for patterns to become plain; time has to pass. Rothenstein's tactic is less patient; a direct accusation of '*enfeeblement*' is his rationale in what amounts to a break in the tradition of the historiography itself.

The introductory essay itself begins by shedding a fascinating light on the historiographical record prior to 1952. Rothenstein devotes a considerable number of paragraphs to substantiating the idea that art writing and criticism has failed in recent decades.

⁵⁶ Rothenstein, 1952 p.xi

⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.xi

*When we consider the serious character of more than a few of the English painters of our time, the numbers of perceptive writers interested in painting, and the avid and increasing interest of the public in the fine arts, the paucity of substantial writings devoted to the work of these painters is astonishing.*⁵⁸

He goes on to partly contradict the previously stated methodology for this volume, perhaps demonstrating a weakened rigour in his own work too.

*Year by year, however, I have been expectantly awaiting some treatment of British painting of somewhat wider scope – some work in which the principal figures would be placed in relation to one another, their works compared and subjected to critical investigation.*⁵⁹

As Rothenstein begins to approach his subject-matter more closely his natural eclecticism is defended for its ability to appreciate value in representational art as well as the more abstract. He contrasts this with Herbert Read, whose writing on modern art, according to Rothenstein has

*...serious objectivity. But Mr. Read's pages, judicious though they are, unmistakably convey the impression that there is an inherent superiority in revolutionary art and that representational art is a curious survival, condemned by its very nature to sterility and hardly worthy therefore of the attention of the critic.*⁶⁰

This type of debate in print, as it were, between two of the chief writers on art of the time moves into an academic register and points towards a much later period when scholarship relating to English modernism became much more active and of a revisionary nature.

Rothenstein's next defensive gesture is to argue for the integrity of biographically-informed art history. Hitherto, this had been a critical norm, despite Fry and Bell's long-standing and contrary influence, but by this time the practice needed some theoretical justification.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.18

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.18-9

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.19-20

*But are we not moved yet more deeply by the works of art which we are able to see in relation to the personalities of the artists who made them, or against the background of the society from which they came? It is my conviction that we are, and that the more we know about both the artist and his subject the fuller is likely to be our comprehension of the work of art.*⁶¹

Rothenstein then develops another justification – this time to strengthen his credibility as a commentator. He recounts, in a brief memoir format, his privileged access to artists stretching back to his childhood before moving into a more direct account of the balance he strikes between experience and instinct when judging art. He almost grudgingly concedes that, '*...there does seem to exist some correspondence between inspired art and revolutionary art*'⁶² which brings him back to the matter in hand, so to speak. His central point is to assert the continuity principle, but it is the continuity of revolution, not tradition, that he now espouses.

*From Delacroix to Cézanne every great painter made his contribution to a revolutionary process, and the more closely we study the period the more completely is the assumption justified, and the more intimately are important painters, formerly regarded as conservative or even reactionary, understood to be implicated with change.*⁶³

Rothenstein uses this point to move towards a wide-ranging summary of the development of modern art that, as is usually the case, cites Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin and he considers Cubism in some depth, before proceeding to scan across the rest of Europe without pausing to mention any English artists. He finally arrives at his stinging summary appraisal of his stated subject. '*...very few would seem to attach serious importance to the contribution of our own country*'⁶⁴

⁶¹ *ibid.* p.21

⁶² *ibid.* p.24

⁶³ *ibid.* p.24

⁶⁴ *ibid.* p.37

He reinforces his case by referring to recent highly disparaging press notices about an exhibition of British Art mounted at the Tate in 1947⁶⁵ after touring Europe. Rothenstein's final argument has an ambivalence which exhibits one of the most prevalent critical tendencies in much of the literature. His commitment to demonstrating national loyalty alongside deep reverence for more specifically defined Continental modernism has a contradictory quality that amounts to a major critical confusion that his polished rhetoric only partially hides. The final paragraph is quoted at length to illustrate the two dominant discursive tropes each struggling for separate credibility and overall coherence.

*Is this commonplace of criticism – hardly less widely accepted here than abroad- that an immeasurable gulf still separates the painting of England from that of France in fact justified? Or is it an inevitable consequence of the dazzling ascendancy of France right up to the immediate past? And of the debt which every English artist of our age – with a single exception to be noticed later – owes to French inspiration in formative years? I am conscious of the national prejudice, the parochialism, the personal affections that may have gone to the formation of my opinion, but I am conscious also of the obligation to place on record my conviction that no such gulf exists, and that the English school shows no less excellence than the French and considerably more interest. It counts among its members a wide range of mature and highly individual personalities, and, although it cannot, of course compare in inventiveness with the French school, it has shown a power, not conspicuous elsewhere of applying the basic discoveries of the most original painters on Continental Europe to the representation of many of the traditional subjects of European art.*⁶⁶

Rothenstein's preface to the second volume, 'Lewis to Moore,' written in October 1955, begins with his justification for continuing to only include painters born before 1900 and adhering to his chronological scheme, and perhaps an ill-advised aside that Henry Lamb was not included because, 'he deprecated any

⁶⁵ An exhibition of Modern British Pictures exhibited by The British Council in Europe during 1946 and subsequently toured by The Arts Council in the British Provinces 1947-8.

⁶⁶ Rothenstein, J. 1952 p.19

such study⁶⁷. This comment was somewhat clumsy and misrepresentative of Lamb's actual position as the correspondence archive shows that it was Lamb's modesty and self-deprecation that had led to his reluctance.⁶⁸ Rothenstein then reiterates his organising principle, still adamant that,

*... the chronological arrangement of these studies is deliberately intended to emphasize the individuality of their subjects by cutting them off from all such fortuitous and ephemeral groupings.*⁶⁹

Thus again he distances himself from the critical norm, refusing to be drawn into a more subjective and discursively demanding format.

The truly astonishing aspect of this volume is its opening essay on Wyndham Lewis that should be read in close tandem with the second essay on Duncan Grant. These two fiery essays together encapsulate the way Rothenstein presented to his readers his estimation of the 1910-15 years and demonstrate just how personal passion and bitterness can operate as a history-writing impulse. To the twenty-first century reader the adjective 'unprofessional' springs to mind, but clearly even fifty years ago Rothenstein felt unable to conform to the usual neutral codes of praise and criticism and launched his prejudices without restraint. To this day the vitriol he poured upon the Bloomsbury artists and writers in these essays appears regularly as evidence of an unjustified outrage that their apologists continue to remember.

⁶⁷ Rothenstein, J. 1956. p.ix

⁶⁸ Correspondence between Lamb and Rothenstein during 1955 elucidates this situation. In TGA 8726.2.106, a letter from Rothenstein to Lamb on 13th July, 1955 requests material for a chapter for Volume 2. Lamb's reply of 15th July is an indirect refusal saying he, '*... had no press cuttings, nor any appetite for contemporary publicity*'. Rothenstein wrote again 7th September clarifying the matter, '*I should like to make it clear that it was by your wish and not mine that you were left out.*' Rothenstein asks if Lamb could be quoted on his portrait of Lytton Strachey. Lamb's reply of 24th September 1955 agrees this and he also agrees to consider a draft of the chapter. Rothenstein replied on 18th October saying it was too late as the book had gone to print.

⁶⁹ Rothenstein, J. 1956, p.x

These controversies tend to have obscured how the first essay contains important and direct evidence of how Rothenstein situated Lewis' pre- World War One painting as he looked back over his career. Rothenstein, with wit and panache develops an analogy of Lewis as an alien; thereby stressing his unique particularity.

It should occasion little surprise if research were to establish that this was the guise in which he first in fact appeared upon our planet: a defiant and heavily-armoured mechanical man newly descended from Mars.⁷⁰

Rothenstein emphasises Lewis' original and on-going isolation in the art world, but embarrassingly quickly he moves to denounce the Bloomsbury set – a tirade that couldn't wait beyond the second page to infuse Rothenstein's argument. A long quotation is the only way to appreciate this immoderate and unseemly rant.

Reputations are made, and to an extent far greater than the public appreciates, by members of gangs acting in close support of one another. I doubt, for instance, whether more than a few people are even now aware how closely knit an association 'Bloomsbury' was, how untiring its members were in advertising one another's work and personalities. Most people who came into contact with members of this gifted circle recall its charm, its candour, its high intelligence; few of those who were impressed by the openness of mind and the humane opinions proclaimed by 'The Nation', afterwards 'The New Statesman and Nation', their parish magazine, suspected how ruthless and businesslike were their methods. They would have been surprised if they had known of the lengths to which some of these people – so disarming with their gentle Cambridge voices, their informal manners, their casual unassuming clothes, their civilised personal relations with one another – were prepared to go in order to ruin, utterly, not only the 'reactionary' figures whom they publicly denounced, but young painters and writers who showed themselves too independent to come to terms with the canons observed by 'Bloomsbury' or, more precisely, with the current 'party line', which varied from month to month in accordance with what their leader considered the most 'significant' trends of opinion prevailing in Paris. ...I rarely knew such hatreds pursued with such malevolence over so many years.... One of these days it will be possible to arrive at a

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p.13. This can also be seen as an echo of *The Times* review quoted in chapter 2, footnote 53.

*clearer idea of 'Bloomsbury' art criticism by considering it in the light of the personal relations of certain of its leading members to the artists whose works came under the notice of 'The Nation' and its successor,*⁷¹

The stream of negativity, in what is actually an essay about Wyndham Lewis, hugely undermines the conventions of art writing. Many explanations and indirect retractions have been offered but it remains the case that, through this verbal assault Bloomsbury painting, as well as art criticism, was further injured in terms of its reputation.

Later scholarship on this matter has been revealing. Frances Spalding, in her biography of Vanessa Bell, provides some context and explanation for this outburst. Spalding cites a letter from Vanessa to her daughter Angelica Garnett, written on 23rd August 1951, which describes Rothenstein's visit to Charleston to gather information for the essay on Duncan Grant.⁷²

Spalding then argues at some length, that Rothenstein's attack quoted above has little credibility, except perhaps in relation to some of Clive Bell's art criticism, and she asserts that Bloomsbury historians to this day believe there was little cause for Rothenstein's subsequent unseemly vitriol in print.⁷³

A further observation can be made about this ill-disciplined intrusion into the essay on Lewis. It clearly cannot be regarded as simply the outburst of someone who was impetuous, and still caught up in the mood of a heated

⁷¹ *ibid.* pp.14-15

⁷² "He threatens to do the same by me,' Vanessa told Angelica, 'but I dislike him so much that I could hardly be polite.' The immediate cause of her intense dislike had been Rothenstein's remark, inadvertently made at lunch, that Titian could not draw. Vanessa said nothing but she directed at him a stare of such fury and utter contempt that he visibly cowered and momentarily lost his social aplomb. Almost certainly her withering look fuelled Rothenstein's dislike of Bloomsbury." Spalding, F. *Vanessa Bell*, first published by Weidenfield and Nicolson, London: 1983, cited here from the edition by Tempus Publishing Ltd., Gloucestershire, 2006, p.324

⁷³ There may also have been long-standing grievances about the well-documented rift between his father, William Rothenstein and Roger Fry over the planning of the Second post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1912.

exchange. It is a full four years after the meeting at Charleston before Rothenstein published this material in his second volume. Quite clearly the resentment and anger were lasting and he felt no need on reflection to temper his accusations. It also has to be noted that Vanessa Bell herself was denied the privilege of having an essay written on her work in this volume.

Rothenstein's appraisal of Lewis eventually calms itself and the account of Lewis' art education and pre-War years is highly researched. Rothenstein crisply records Lewis' liaison with the Camden Town Group, but emphasises precisely the inception of Lewis' innovative style.

Certainly there was no community of aim between Lewis and his fellow members, and he played no part in the Group's brief but influential history. But from 1911, the year of its foundation, dates the earliest of a fairly extensive group of drawings in which Lewis for the first time consistently strikes a note that we recognize as unmistakeably his own....During the following year, he began to make drawings of a character afterwards recognized as Vorticist.⁷⁴

Rothenstein does not take the line that many less careful accounts propounded that Vorticism was simply an English form of Futurism or Cubism. He cites Lewis himself at length to justify his rejection of any glib recourse to the standard tropes of style and categories present in so many accounts. Instead Rothenstein, at last, demonstrates for many pages an art historical and curatorial discipline expending effort on naming and describing individual drawings and paintings. However, his account is again distracted by rivalries and dramatic events in the pre-War interplay between Lewis and his associates and Fry and his Bloomsbury colleagues. The 'Round Robin' affair concerning accusations about a commission for the Ideal Home Exhibition that led to a huge rift is described in enthusiastic detail precipitating further acidic attacks on Fry that also impute the reputation of Virginia Woolf as Fry's biographer.

⁷⁴ Rothenstein, J. 1956, p.23

*According to his biographer Fry decided not to take up the challenge. 'No legal verdict', as he observed, 'would clear his character or vindicate the Omega.' But he had other means of visiting his rancour on the principal challenger. Of these he did not neglect to make unremitting use.*⁷⁵

This is a literary device full of melodramatic, unspecified story-telling suspense.

Rothenstein does not choose to elaborate – merely leaving the reader to believe there is ample evidence to support this poisonous comment from an insider.

Understandably this essay surveys Lewis' output for many years after the Vorticist experimentation. Rothenstein is almost unable to do justice to the huge volume of writing and art that accrued. Rothenstein is at his most original and insightful when he ponders the role that Lewis assumed within the mechanisms of the critical reception of his own work, positing that Lewis would have been better advised to resist these interventions. These comments convey Rothenstein's awareness of how delicate the balance is between the benefits of positive self-promotion on the one hand and, on the other, an unintended negative effect.

*Most of the original painters of his time have written little or nothing in justification of their work; when they have written at all, it has more often than not been in response to pressure from an enterprising publisher. Contemporary painting, with its repudiation of traditions and of the reality perceptible to the average eye, has indeed brought into being a vast expository literature, but this is pre-eminently the work of art critics and art historians. Had Lewis not been so apt to show himself mistrustful towards those who have written about his work, and on occasion dictatorial, it would have found effective advocates, and relieved him of any obligation to take up the pen in his own defence. In one sense such advocates might well have been more effective than he: effective in the sense of winning sympathy and patronage for his painting. But in another sense he was his own most effective advocate.*⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.27

⁷⁶ *ibid.* p.39

This interjection illustrates and comments on more than Lewis. It shows that in this essay, published in 1956, Rothenstein is exploring a reflexive register that he allows to surface from time to time and which approaches and heralds a debate within the art historical discipline more widely on the tensions and blurred distinctions that arise between the agents of the production of art and critical reception mechanisms.

Rothenstein's essay makes no attempt to separate the personally-privileged anecdote from the scholarly assessment and in the final pages of this essay his memories of dinners and personal encounters involving Lewis predominate. This marks this writing also as part of the art historical style that relied upon such material for its authority – a sub-genre that reached the end of its natural life in the early fifties and nowadays reads as replete with literary licence and undermines, to the reader of today, the professionalism of Rothenstein's judgement.

Rothenstein's second essay on Duncan Grant becomes very explicit and self-referential on this matter from its opening paragraphs. He argues strongly that his personal knowledge of artists is of benefit to his task, and rails at some length about those who deceptively assume scholarly detachment.

*What malevolence ... may be masked from the casual reader of certain learned journals by a bland manner, numerous footnotes, meticulous citation of authorities!*⁷⁷

Apart from re-iterating his working principle as an art writer this argument prepares the ground for Rothenstein to legitimately recount the rift between Roger Fry and his father William Rothenstein over forty years previously when plans were being made for the first Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton

⁷⁷ *ibid* p.44

Galleries. John Rothenstein chooses to re-open the matter so as to explain the possibility of any bias against Bloomsbury artists, or '*want of fairness*'⁷⁸, as he puts it. However, he then states that,

*... Grant has never associated himself with the vendettas and intrigues so ruthlessly pursued by certain of his friends, or indeed been actively concerned with art politics of any kind.*⁷⁹

Thus the indulgent way in which Rothenstein yet again attacks Fry, (the reader can assume,) and his associates has actually no relevance to his subject whom he considered was exempt from worldly feuds. This outburst in a seriously constructed and argued text demonstrates authorial and editorial weakness. It has to be concluded that perhaps at this time, even in publications having a scholarly ambition such as this, there was a tolerance, or even an encouragement that allowed 'human interest' strands in the historical narrative to enliven the text. Rothenstein hides behind some quasi-legalistic justification, implying that he has to declare some conflict of interest before discussing Grant, but the effect is diminished by the unresolved rancour that communicates strongly to the reader and detracts from his subject. The importance of '*Modern English Painters*', as one of the dominant art historical texts of the 1950s is compromised by the way Rothenstein's personal knowledge tips over from what might be regarded as authoritative opportunity to a serious critical weakness.

Rothenstein recovers his composure somewhat but he refutes the acclamation that Raymond Mortimer had given Grant in the 1944 Penguin Modern Painters series (see above). Rothenstein's correction to this is direct and blatant and he is convincingly specific about continental influence. Other writers who made this kind of generalisation as a matter of course lacked the fire-power of

⁷⁸ *ibid* p.44

⁷⁹ *ibid* p.45

Rothenstein's comparisons and thus this passage stands as a summary of Grant's early work that would in all likelihood hold considerable sway.

*Still Life' (apples) of about 1912, is almost pure Cezanne. 'Head of Eve' of 1913, is Picasso of the Demoiselles d'Avignon period; 'The Tub' of the same year, would be unimaginable without Matisse and 'Background for a Venetian Ballet,' of 1922, is a belated essay in Fauvism, in the manner of Derain.*⁸⁰ [Fig 22]

This surgically precise assessment precedes an important further section in this essay where Grant is squarely positioned principally as a designer chiefly expressing himself through the activities of the Omega workshop.

*The opportunity of designing and decorating a wide variety of objects revealed both to him and others that he possessed a richly inventive faculty hitherto hardly suspected.*⁸¹

Grant's fading reputation as a pioneering post-Impressionist painter is further eroded by Rothenstein as he then gives great emphasis to Grant's work as a theatre designer and muralist as he describes the projects in the years prior to the Great War. Grant's later work is then considered when, as Rothenstein puts it, he was free from, *'the spell of Post-Impressionism.'*⁸² Thus the narrative that pre-war experimentation was no more than an unsustainable imitative dalliance is perpetuated forcefully in this essay, and the swift recourse to the cultural hierarchy that gives painting precedence over design seals the reputation of Grant at this juncture. The essay also, despite its knowledge base and its wealth of examples betrays Rothenstein's near obsession with Roger Fry and his coterie to the point where Grant is portrayed as a survivor of this influence rather than unmoved, or even a beneficiary. Old scores are still being settled in this essay which creates an art historical style that is highly readable yet critically vulnerable. It is this vulnerability which has to be noted despite the

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.50

⁸¹ *ibid.* p.52

⁸² *ibid.* p.54

securely dominant position that this series of volumes has in the bibliography of English modern art. As has been discussed above there are also clear ways in which the structuring of the material also detracts from a full understanding of the currents and interconnecting cultural specificities of the art in question, notwithstanding Rothenstein's declaration that this was not within his self-devised brief, nor in fact an outlook that he found to be analytically valid. Clearly at this time, and given his powerful position, he was able to in effect offer a 'history', that was in fact a collection of highly personalised essays, albeit infused with firsthand authoritative detail.

Rothenstein's position at the Tate, although still highly contentious and stressful, remained capable of affording his publications attention and respect from the establishment. The copy of the first volume sent to Winston Churchill at 10 Downing Street was greeted seriously and promptly. *'It will have a special place in my library'* (10th June 1952).

The second volume not surprisingly elicited strong reactions from several of those who had been written about. Duncan Grant, quite uncharacteristically, entered into a fractious correspondence with Rothenstein about what he saw as the unjust treatment of his Bloomsbury associates that Rothenstein only reluctantly and tardily responded to, even resorting to a rather childish claim that he had mislaid Grant's original missive⁸³. William Roberts, perhaps more characteristically took issue with much of the factual content in a letter to the publishers in September 1956, concluding his comments with,

⁸³ Letters were exchanged between Rothenstein and Grant between September and November 1956, the most substantial, comprising 7 handwritten pages, being written by Grant from 'Charleston' on September 23rd, sur-titled 'Private' wherein he severely admonishes Rothenstein for his false descriptions of Bloomsbury's ruthlessness. Rothenstein's delayed response in November is highly defensive and he refuses to identify his sources. TGA 8726/2/106

*All these extracts are untrue in Fact. Taken together they assert that at the period in question, I was an uncultured superficial plagiarist of the painting of Mr. Lewis.*⁸⁴

Anonymous reviewers in *The Times* trod a more careful deferential line in their comments. The comments on the first book immediately echo Rothenstein's perception that little had been written on this subject in recent years but, with some critical ambiguity, emphasise that this effort,

*...expresses the point of view of a writer who was brought up among the artists of his father's generation and is still loyal to some among them who are no longer regarded with admiration.*⁸⁵

The second volume is praised for its 'documentary value'; however, there is a veiled suggestion of a compromising dependence on personally-gleaned information that hints at the book's weakness -in scholarly terms - and amounts to faint praise for a book intended as definitive.

*... much of what the author has to say consists of a perceptive record of his personal contact with his subjects, and to this extent his book may be said to be rich in 'exclusive' material. It is unlikely that future historians, however drastically posterity may ultimately revise the ever fluctuating hierarchy of artistic reputations, will find nothing of value in its pages.*⁸⁶

Rothenstein's unseemly outbursts about the Bloomsbury coterie noted above are ignored, even contradicted, citing his '*conscientious endeavour to be impartial.*'⁸⁷

These two reviews, I would contend, signal a moment in the historiography when Rothenstein's writing began to become unsatisfactorily too intimate with the art and artists he wished to situate historically. Perhaps this would have been appropriate if the whole project had not been so self-consciously devised to occupy a critical vacuum, but given its almost complete monopoly in the early

⁸⁴ TGA 8726/2/106-

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 18th June, 1952.

⁸⁶ *The Times*, 27th September, 1956.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

1950s this genre of art history, that mixed anecdote and antipathies with experienced appraisals, was beginning to be no longer fit for the purpose of measured historical analysis. It may also be asserted that Rothenstein's history-making took a step back from the sophistication that Chamot, his colleague at The Tate Gallery, had achieved before the Second World War

An illuminating and corroborating comparison can be made with the more compressed essay Rothenstein wrote to introduce the catalogue of the exhibition, *'Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism'* held at the Tate Gallery 6th July- 19th August 1956. When addressing his views in this context the personalised rhetoric was more restrained but still conveyed an excitable line of argument, and was somewhat coarse in that it raised negative associations not usually considered appropriate for this kind of celebratory occasion. Before any pleasantries are attempted Rothenstein instantly leaps to confront Lewis' colourful personality; " ... *the majority view – was that he was a loud-mouthed dabbler in many fields of action – loud-mouthed, dangerous and 'unsound.'*"⁸⁸ In fact Rothenstein twisted this apparently negative outburst so that it became a mechanism to deplore Lewis' lack of public recognition. However the effect is not entirely successful and did not manage fully to challenge the *status quo* with any eloquence. The point he made was awkwardly phrased and tasteless to a degree.

*His detractors, fearful of his fly-swatter, have ever been reluctant to attack him openly, and now, fearful, no doubt, of having their 'taste' called into question by attacking an old blind man, they are more than ever reticent.*⁸⁹

The short essay recovers from these badly-judged opening paragraphs and the analysis and history that follows has much more balance. The history of

⁸⁸ Tate Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*, 1956 p.5

⁸⁹ *ibid.* p.5

Vorticism is deftly delineated from Futurism, although acknowledging the original interactions and influence of Marinetti. Rothenstein has no problem with an inclusive attitude towards other artists who were 'associated' with Vorticism; not surprising given their presence in the exhibition as well, but counter to the standard solipsism of Lewis when he recounted the history of Vorticism.

Lewis himself also wrote an introductory piece for the catalogue that preceded Rothenstein's summary history and was perhaps the strongest expression of personal dominance.

*Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period.*⁹⁰

It is this pithy quotation that has been cited repeatedly, but usually in isolation in the literature. However its context shows Lewis expanding on his views on history-writing in a vein that demonstrates his belief in critical failure. This also shows how it was possible to introduce a historiographical comment into the exhibition catalogue genre.

*About the Group, directed by myself, and called 'Vorticist', a great deal has been written by what we now call Art Historians. Some of the Art History relating to Vorticism which I have read has been unrecognisable.*⁹¹

And more generally,

*Persons today who have become advocates of abstract art, and who have written about Vorticism, are apt to write differently about it from the more 'objective' historian.*⁹²

1956 was the year before Lewis died and his obituaries can therefore be compared to the way his life's work was being processed historically at this time. William Townsend, a well-known artist and writer, seeking to sum up

⁹⁰ *ibid.* Lewis, W. p.3

⁹¹ *ibid.* p.3

⁹² *ibid.* p.4

Lewis' life in *The Burlington Magazine* inverts the normal trajectory by celebrating his later work, his portrait of Edith Sitwell (1923-35) in particular.

*... it seems mistaken now to plump for the Vorticist label and leave Lewis at that.*⁹³

However, the obituary also relies on Rothenstein's *Modern English Painters* to comment on Lewis' early urge to 'apply Cubism to subjects of wider scope'⁹⁴ and Lewis' famous solipsistic assertion in the exhibition catalogue quoted above, but the tone is more distanced and measured as if Lewis' death would allow more mature historical insights to evolve.

Vorticism will interest the art-historian as the English aspect of a European movement and one that appears, in time, flatteringly closer than usual to its prototype;

This is a further example of a growing awareness of the mechanisms that determined immediate and provisional judgements and the manner in which they enter the history-making and history-writing arena and are subsequently often revised. It is as if these faint asides in the written discourse themselves together forms a developing current of debate as writers and historians carefully hedge their evaluative statements in a knowing way. The purpose of this secondary discourse is certainly a self-protecting strategy on the part of writers but it can also be used to trace the ways in which the practices of art history itself began to surface, and which were ultimately exposed and theorised more directly at a much later date.

⁹³ *The Burlington Magazine*, June 1957, p.202

⁹⁴ Rothenstein, J, 1956 p35

Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned to substantiate the notion that the writing which addressed the emergence of English modernism before the Great War reached a discursive staging-post in the early nineteen fifties, largely determined and set by Rothenstein's major contribution to the historiography. The fifteen years of art-writing that are considered in this chapter exemplify a pivotal time in the discourse about early English modernism when the well-worn tropes seem to reach the end of their discursive life-span. These critical refrains are accompanied by glimmers of art historical self-awareness that would prepare the ground for revisionary thinking on English modern art at a later date. The critical writing remains heavily committed to the paradigm of English mediocrity and French dominance although writers such as Gaunt see France as having been a cultural hub in a wider more internationalist sense. Individual artists are further marginalised by this consensus, to the point where the early work of the Bloomsbury artists is a fast-fading element in the narrative and Lewis, notably, is the architect of a negative re-assessment of the pre-War years of his own work and that of the other Vorticists.

Unsurprisingly, the debate on national character and its relation to modern art continued through the second War and beyond, finding a particular articulate expression, (although largely negative) in Michael Ayrton's series of articles, but

also investigated by Pevsner⁹⁵, pointing towards later scholarship that would re-examine English modernism with an emphasis on its cultural specificity.

It has been argued that Rothenstein's landmark publications are centre-stage during these years but that their undoubted quality as informed analysis of individual painters is compromised by personalised attacks, and unseemly prejudice with respect to the Bloomsbury faction, which not only denigrates their art but also further depletes the reputation of Roger Fry as a writer. However more positively, Rothenstein, and other writers, began during the post-war years to introduce a much stronger authorial voice which raised important self-reflexive questions about the critical process and the health, or otherwise of art-writing itself. These kinds of tentative, sometimes clumsy, observations can be seen as a preliminary intellectual excursion leading to later new art historical registers that would probe the mechanisms of historiography and its role in canon formation in much greater depth.

⁹⁵ Pevsner, N, *The Englishness of English Art – an expanded and annotated version of the Reith Lectures broadcast in Oct/Nov 1955*, London: Architectural Press, 1956.

Thesis Conclusion

The empirical data gathered for this research have been revealing in terms of the quality, shape and overall narrative structure of the first stages in the historiography of early English modernism. These primary sources form a body of material which I hope can contribute an additional resource to recent and on-going scholarship that has demonstrated a keen interest in revisiting the emergence of modernism in England.

The amalgam of critical approaches I have encountered in the documentary material analysed in this thesis is complex. The literature contains some insightful and important critiques that are sensitised and progressive but as I have shown much of the historiography is lacking in originality and coverage. Overall the discourse is outclassed and eclipsed both by penetrating theoretical examinations of modern art, (as proposed by Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Herbert Read amongst others), and an endemic preoccupation with the growth and development of Continental modernism that saw little need to consider English efforts in any length or depth. This latter emphasis principally concerned itself with art nurtured in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century and obscured any profound discursive appetite for comparative analysis. As the years passed there is also a strong tendency for the pre-War experimentation to be disowned and overlooked and new waves of British modern art did little to engender reverence on the part of critics for the pre-War pioneers. Not surprisingly the combined effect of these forces subverted the quality and richness of the discourse I have researched. However, it can be acknowledged that writers such as Frank Rutter and Mary Chamot progressed beyond the critical deficit finding convincing arguments of cultural specificity that were applied to the

emergence of modernism in England. These would establish a worthy, but partial, foundation for late 20th century scholarship.

The critical distance intrinsic to my methodology necessitated a dispassionate historiographical perspective to be to the fore throughout the survey. At the broadest level this meant that the texts which were the core of my evidence base, published art criticism and art history, were selected for their ability to represent the discursive patterning over a forty year period and a clear fault-line has emerged. Prior to the mid 1950s the historiographic record is weak and erratic. Most writers were seemingly neither inspired nor competent to account for artistic experimentation in England and clearly felt their critical loyalties and predispositions lay in appreciations of continental modernism that no more than ambivalently addressed parochial achievements. The discourse was also depleted by the pervasive presence of two World Wars and all-embracing socio-economic crises. These external factors inevitably distorted critical retrospection and permitted an overlay of nationalistic rhetoric within the discipline of art-writing. I think it can now be asserted that the energetic revisionary scholarship of recent decades can be partly explained by attempts to redress the inconsistencies and shortfalls of the first forty years of critical reception.

Writers on English modern art since about 1980, perhaps prompted by Charles Harrison's historiographically-oriented survey¹, have clearly felt an imperative to re-visit the rather shallow critical tradition that I have researched. Until then English modernism had been positioned as tentative and curtailed and, we can imply, inherently not worthy of sustained analysis, creating an embedded and collective historiographical judgement that became a tenacious narrative.

Recent scholars however have formulated new perspectives underpinned by

¹ Harrison, C. 1981.

the search for continuities and origins within nineteenth century art, most clearly exemplified in the work of David Peters Corbett. Lisa Tickner has established a scholarly perspective based on her belief that art is, above all, '*socially porous*'² and her guiding methodology has revealed new contextual insights to explain the art produced just prior to the Great War.

My overall estimation then is that a partial critical failure occurred which derived from a weakened critical tradition; a tradition characterised by culturally-specific pre-occupations and prejudices, which also led to widespread tropical fatigue in the extant literature. Ultimately the judgement of time may exonerate the broad view that new visual practices in England could never have matched the international significance of Parisian ferment but the correctness, or otherwise, of this evaluative disparity has not been allowed to cloud my focus on the historiography itself, which, as I have shown, no more than erratically addressed the manner in which this period was historically and critically positioned.

Methodologically, my starting point, outlined in chapter one, was to identify the painting that was in scope and to base this on the body of art which had been critically designated from the outset as radical and modern; and which was clearly in opposition to academic and traditional genres that were still active in the cultural environment. As this was always conceived as a research exercise which arose from a curiosity about the development of the *grand* narrative of English modernism, that is, a narrative which created and fuelled the headlines of critical reception, it became necessary to adhere to the broad critical sweeps of opinion that writers and critics offered those interested in art, whether these readers were professional colleagues, informed lay people or the less aware

² Tickner, L. 2000. P12

general public. This critical perspective was structured by the classifications that writers offered their readerships, which was importantly (and typically) related to the actual or perceived parameters of exhibitions. This principle of responsiveness to the primary sources, and their intrinsic relationship to art exhibition history, led my enquiries strongly towards a tri-partite way to examine the historiography. In other words, the clearest way to establish historiographically accurate discursive patterns was to follow the writers' organisational methodologies, which in general offered distinctions and comparisons between the painters largely associated with Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Group, Bloomsbury post-Impressionism, and Vorticism, - or English Cubo-Futurism. These are unsubtle categories that are not always valid when put under close scrutiny in terms of individual artist's careers but nonetheless they formed a tenacious discursive infrastructure in the literature which I felt should be reflected in my survey. I have indicated throughout where writers deviated from this prevailing taxonomy and have sought to open up the detail below this armature and to comment on the benefits, drawbacks and inconsistencies created thereby. It seemed overall, after considering a large body of literature that readers demanded this reliance on the familiar schools and groupings commonly deployed by art writers, even if in reality there was more fluidity and contingent circumstances involved in the exhibition history of individual artists that some more careful writers pointed out in the more detailed paragraphs of their texts.

Further to this I have drawn attention throughout to the fact that there is also a significant element in the historiography concerning the treatment of individual artists whatever their allegiances and involvements with sub-sets of the modern movement had been. I have established that where a critical tendency to rely

upon exhibiting groups was *not* present in the literature a different strand of the overall discourse is revealed, one which often countered, and sometimes contradicted, the sweeping disparagements of the easily observable groupings of artists. This strand has two elements; firstly it was sometimes an explicit analytical principle on the part of critics to avoid 'isms' and schools – John Rothenstein in particular argues cogently against the validity of historical clusters of artists. Other writers, with simpler aspirations, clearly felt more comfortable presenting their material almost in a directory format. The two elements are also importantly linked in the historiography to monographs of varying depth and insight and these in turn have a critical consonance to reviews of one-man exhibitions. When seen overall these differing approaches to the work of individual artists cannot always be reconciled in terms of their evaluative opinions with the more collective and thematically-conceived historical accounts. This is a contradiction at the heart of the evidence assembled for this research exercise.

I have also drawn attention throughout this thesis to other aspects of the flawed nature of this specific historiography, most of which sprang from a poor and thinly-populated critical tradition during the time I have surveyed. This was a tradition which relied heavily upon recycled opinion and an unsophisticated recourse both to national pride and national disparagement, all of which often reduced analysis to prejudice and unwarranted bias. There were individual critics, such as Roger Fry, Frank Rutter, Charles Marriott and later Herbert Read, Mary Chamot and John Rothenstein who applied their considerable knowledge and experience to the early English modernists but, for reasons which I have outlined in the relevant chapters, this never amounted to a concentrated and sustained focus that might have yielded full and nuanced

historical accounts in print. Whether the early pioneering modernists should have been considered to be significant or not in the history of European modernism is beside the point; what *is* clear is that their critics recorded the history of this period with faltering voices, preferring to channel their best efforts towards a critique of the modern art produced on the Continent or to expound theoretically on the phenomenon of modernism itself.

There is no doubt external circumstances exacerbated this flawed relationship between the production and reception of this particular moment of modern art, notably the two World Wars and the resultant loss of critical as well as artistic talent. T.E.Hulme is a spectacular example of a writer whose influence could have been so much more significant had he lived longer. This terrible deficit was compounded by the on-going psychological trauma of War as experienced in the 1920s, when little effort was made to look beyond the prescience of the pre-War artists. The artists themselves, in many cases, effectively wiped their own past from the record by presenting their new, more figurative, visual priorities to audiences eager for calming conservatism. During the 1930s a further form of cultural amnesia held sway as a new generation forged their own artistic innovations. Typically critics only sketchily summarised the pre-War flourish of modernism as a brief moment of inchoate experimentation that had always, and rightfully, been overshadowed by continental energy and achievement. The depleted critical environment of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s did however produce publications of art historical value that, as I argue in the preceding chapters, stand as the high points of the historiography and which form a critical trajectory that reached an interim culmination in Rothenstein's landmark multi-volume history, the point at which this research concludes its enquiry.

It has been important to note, from my vantage point in the early 21st century, that the journey which Vorticism in particular made through the critical literature has been both complex and somewhat surprising. Critics were continually attracted, both positively and negatively, to the work of Lewis and his colleagues from the outset. However, art writers lacked a sustained way to position their purpose and achievement. The dramatic and attention-seeking arrival of Italian Futurism in England added to the critical bewilderment as critics sought to perceive similarities whilst the proto-Vorticists themselves largely and vehemently differentiated themselves ideologically and artistically. This environment of discursive uncertainty was inevitably exacerbated by the tardy consolidation of the movement into an exhibiting group and the hugely disruptive effect on the art world in the years after the outbreak of War. These pressures militated against the development of a mature founding history of the Vorticist movement. This amounts to a significant lacuna in the historiography and one which challenges the widely-held view that Vorticism was swiftly and fully received from the outset as a coherent native modern movement. The often negative retrospection of Lewis himself over the next forty years compounded this critical weakness. However, as the richness of recent Vorticist scholarship testifies, this critical hiatus did not significantly compromise its current reputation as the sole and unequivocal expression of modernism in pre-War England, despite the loss of many paintings dating from this time.

The artists associated with Roger Fry, usually known collectively as Bloomsbury post-Impressionists, travelled a different discursive path in this historiography, their presence being strengthened by the powerful positions their friends and associates held in the cultural scene for many years ensuring that even when their early art faded from public attention their lives and exploits ensured a

certain notoriety that also fuelled the growing canonicity of their work. The long career of Duncan Grant also enabled periodic assessments of his output and practice that revived some interest in his early work. The undoubted role that members of the Bloomsbury group played in the theoretical exploration of modernism, notably Fry himself and Clive Bell, has also supported a powerful and lasting cultural legacy together with the huge significance attached to other Bloomsbury figures such as Maynard Keynes and Virginia Woolf. During the first forty years the critical reception of Bloomsbury post-Impressionism lacked objectivity and even understanding but their ability to ride this discursive deficit can also be explained by the power of the myth that surrounded their coterie, and the controversies with which they became associated.

I have demonstrated in this research that the artists who sprang from the inspiration and leadership of Walter Sickert had solid and sustained careers but their presence in the literature as pioneers of modernism was always more nuanced and perhaps more subdued as critics sought to explain the very English blend of innovation *and* tradition in their work. Sickert himself stood out all through the researched period as dominant and his position is today still secured as pivotal and prime.

As stated above my purpose has been to chart and analyse the *broad* narrative that developed to account for the modern art before the Great War. Individual artists who, for many reasons, defied or stood aloof from the tri-partite groupings, such as Augustus John and Stanley Spencer, have travelled with this narrative. Their work had much critical attention, predominantly positive in the domestic context, but their special and lasting value was often countered by the synoptic negativity of cultural commentators and their overweening critical

enthusiasm to describe and account for clusters of schools and movements in the art scene as a whole.

The decision to follow a narrative – in relief as it were - has been an exercise that required an unwavering perspective to ensure that its focus remained historiographic rather than historical. Theorists of historiography, (particularly Hayden White), have provided a guiding intellectual foundation for my longitudinal case study and I believe their insights, and the methodology I have tested, have shown an applicability for further case studies in the growing field of reception history. The value of this particular research has been to present the key elements of a specific corpus of text-based critical reception and to reveal the discursive causes, strengths and weaknesses of that material. This will enable further understanding of the founding platform of the revisionary scholarship that is now being built on this variable critical tradition within English art history.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Edgar Degas, *L'Absinthe*, Oil on canvas. 1876. 92x68 cm.
Musée d'Orsay



Fig. 2 Spencer Gore, *Rule Britannia*, 1910, Oil on Canvas 76.2x63.5 frame, 97x84.5x11.5 painting, Tate Gallery.



Fig.3 Frederick Etchells, *The dead mole*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 166.5x105.5, Keynes Collection



Fig. 4 Roger Fry, *Angles sur l'Anglin*, 1912. Oil on canvas/board, Private Collection



Fig. 5 Duncan Grant, *The Queen of Sheba*, 1912. Plywood, 120x120cm, Tate Gallery



Fig 6 Duncan Grant, *The Dancers*, 1910-11, Oil on wood, 53.3x66cm. Tate gallery



Fig. 7 Spencer Gore, *Letchworth Station*, 1912. Oil on canvas 63.5x76.2 cm. National Railway Museum, York.

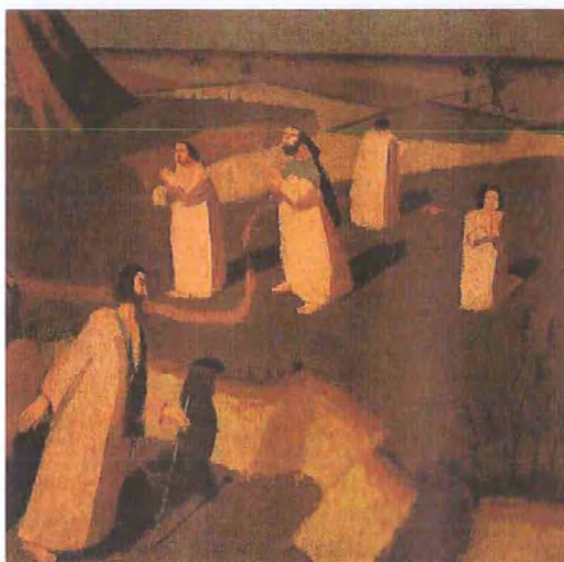


Fig 8 Stanley Spencer, *John Donne Arriving in Heaven*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 36.8x40.6 cm. Private Collection - on loan to Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



Fig. 9. Wyndham Lewis, *Kermesse*, 1912. 35x35.1cm. (irregular), Ink, wash and gouache, Yale Center for British Art.



Fig 10 David Bomberg, *Vision of Ezekiel*, 1912. 114.3x137.2 cm. Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery.

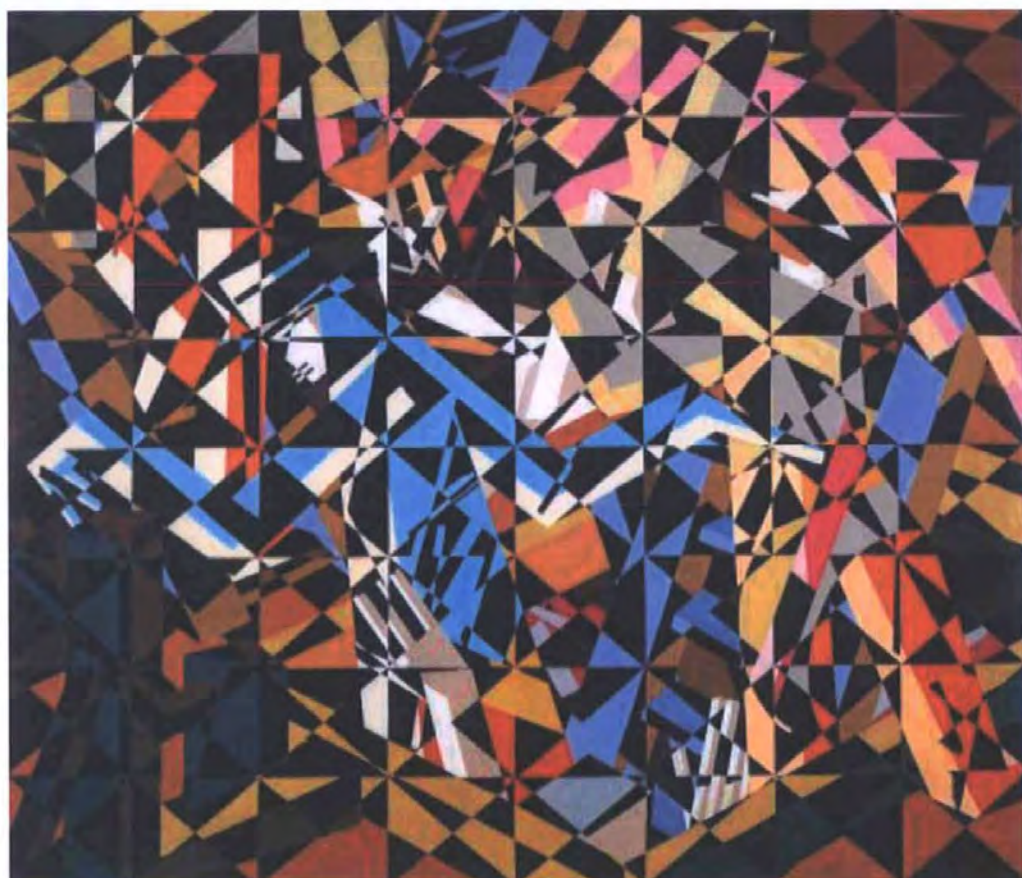


Fig 11 David Bomberg, *In The Hold*, c.1913-4. Oil on canvas, 196.2x231.1cm, Tate Gallery

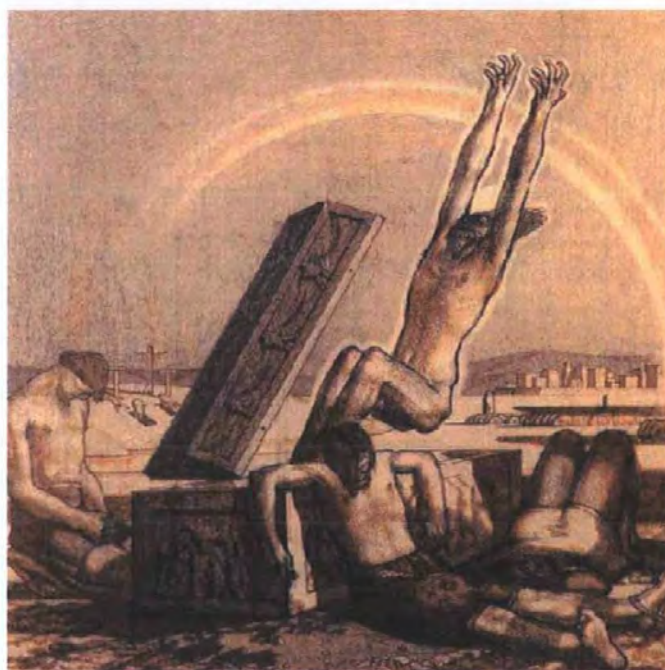


Fig 12 William Roberts, *The Resurrection*, (Slade School Sketch Club Project) 1912. Pencil,pen and ink , 30.5x30.5 cm. Anthony D'Offay Gallery.



Fig 13 Augustus John, *Woman Smiling*, 1908-9.Oil on canvas,196x98.2 cm.Tate Gallery



Fig 14 Walter Sickert, *Ennui*, c.1915. Oil on canvas, 30x32in, Tate Gallery

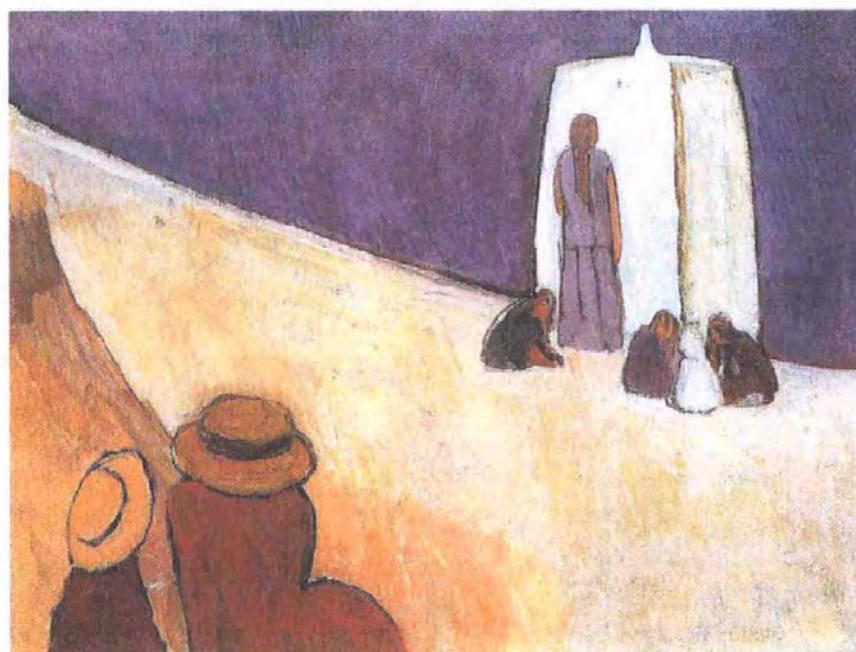


Fig 15 Vanessa Bell, *Studland Beach*, c. 1912. 76.2x101.6 cm.Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery.



Fig 16 Harold Gilman, *Mrs. Mounter at the Breakfast Table*, exh.1917.Oil on canvas, 61x40.5cm., Tate Gallery

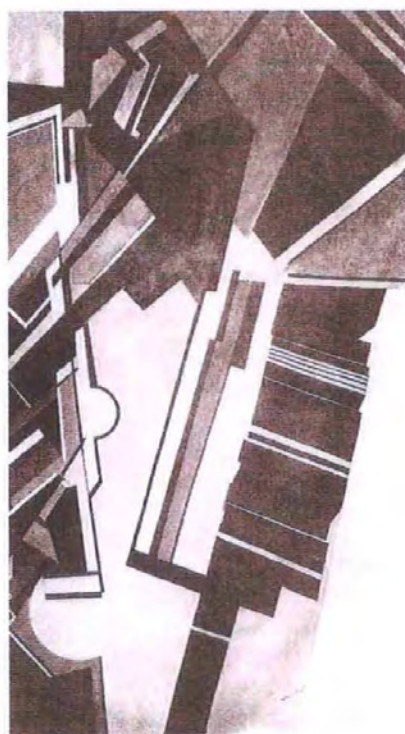


Fig 17 Wyndham Lewis, *Plan of War*, 1913-4, reproduced from *Blast 1* (1914) – also known as *Plan of Campaign*

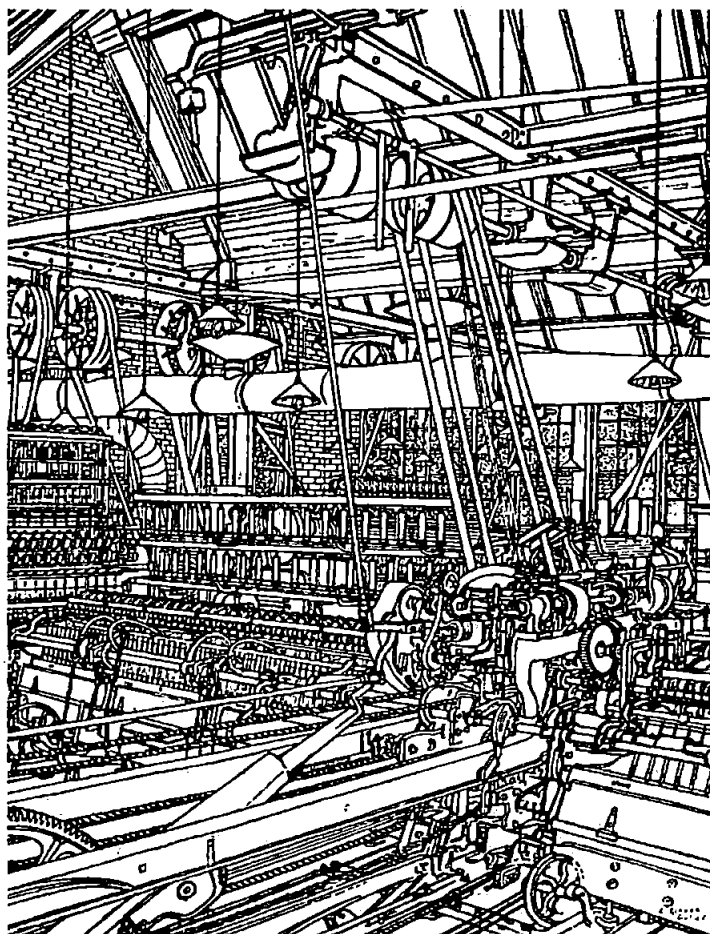


Fig 18 Charles Ginner, *The Great Loom*, drawing, unknown size.

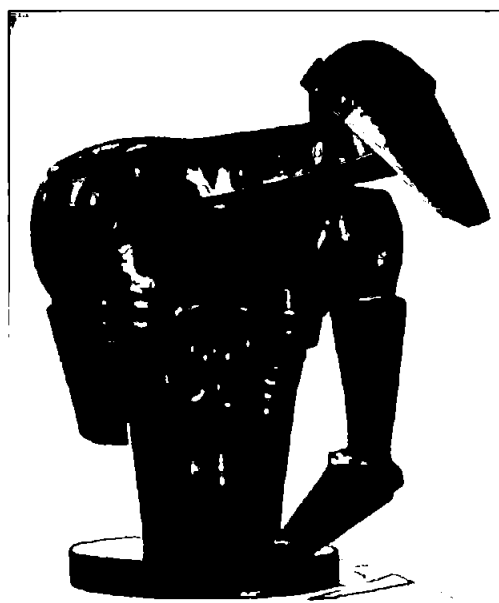


Fig 19 Jacob Epstein, *Torso in Metal* from *The Rock Drill*, 1913-16, Bronze, 70.5x58.5x44.5. Tate Gallery.



Fig 20 Mark Gertler, *Portrait of a Girl*, 1924, Oil on board, 40.6x33,cm. Tate Gallery.



Fig 21, Wyndham Lewis, *Composition*, 1913, Pencil, pen and ink, watercolour, collage. 34x26.5 cm. Tate Gallery.

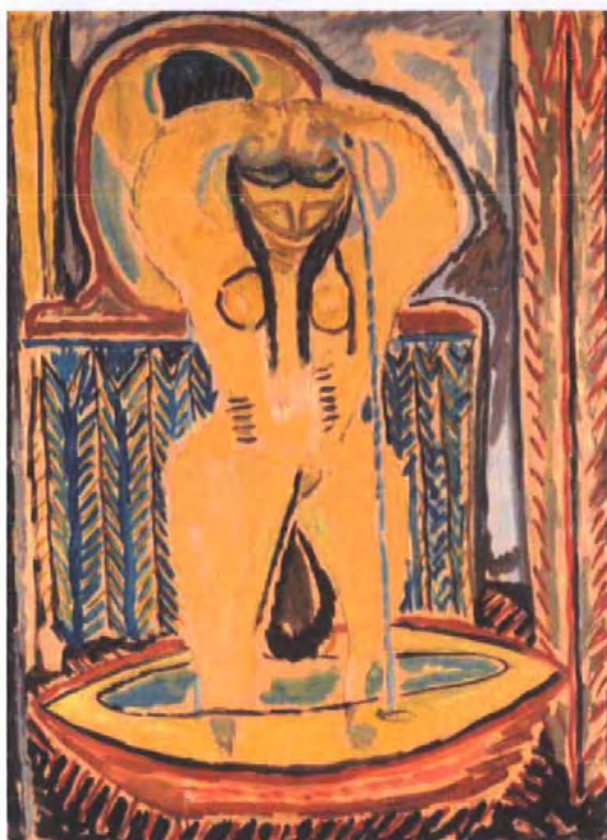


Fig 22 Duncan Grant, *In The Tub*, 1912, Paper laid on canvas, 76x50.8, Tate Gallery.

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